

A ROMANCE OF BUFFALO BILL'S OLD PARD.

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WILD BILL, THE PISTOL DEAD SHOT; Or, DAGGER DON'S DOUBLE.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM,

AUTHOR OF "MERLE, THE MUTINEER," "MONTEZUMA, THE MERCILESS," "FREELANCE, THE BUCCANEER," "THE DARK DEVIL,"
"THE CRETAN ROVER," "THE PIRATE PRINCE," ETC., ETC.



"WALL, PARD STRANGER YEB HEV STRUCK IT RICH," CRIED ONE OF THE COWBOYS. "THREE WITH THER TOES TURNED UP,
AN' TWO IN A DURNED UNHEALTHY GRIP," SAID ANOTHER.

Wild Bill,

THE PISTOL DEAD SHOT;

OR,
DAGGER DON'S DOUBLE.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "MERLE, THE MUTINEER," "MON-
TEZUMA, THE MERCILESS," "CAPTAIN
KYD," "CORSAIR QUEEN,"
"THE MAD MARRIAGE,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

AN UNEXPECTED WITNESS.

"ONE! two! three! fire!"

Two shots followed the words, and a horseman who heard them suddenly drew rein, as he emerged from a clump of timber, and let his eyes rest upon a thrilling scene.

Before him, in an open meadow bordering the bank of a crystal stream, the murmur of whose waters as they glided along seemed toned down to a dirge, stood a group of men, half a dozen in number.

Two of these faced each other, one stood apart, and the remaining three were grouped together.

Three were rough, wild-looking characters, and the remainder of a different stripe.

That a duel was being fought was evident, and one to the death too, as the movements of all, after the first shots had passed showed, for though at the fire one had been wounded, his right and pistol arm dropping to his side, a demand by the unhurt duelist was for another passage of bullets between them.

This demand caused the horseman, who had suddenly ridden upon the scene, to glance more particularly at all, and then ride forward and draw rein within a few paces of the duelists, and then stop, wholly indifferent to the scowling glances turned upon him.

He saw in the wounded man who still held his ground, though evidently suffering greatly, a mere youth of twenty, with a frank, fearless face, refined air, and the dress of a ranchero of Kansas.

Behind him and a little to the left, was a man with gray hair and beard, and with that similarity of face that denoted relationship to the youth.

He was attired in a homespun suit, slouch hat, top boots, and wore a belt of arms, while upon his face rested an anxious look for the fate of his son, whose second he was in the duel.

The antagonist of the youth was a man of striking appearance, tall, elegantly formed, and dressed in a velvet coat, gray corduroy pants, cavalry boots, and a dove-colored sombrero looped up upon one side with a small pin of gold, representing a dagger.

His face would attract attention in any gathering, for its strange beauty, and yet utter daredevilishness, which among bordermen had won for him the soubriquet of Dare Devil Don; but he called himself simply Don, which caused men to believe he was either a Mexican, or had lived in Mexico, for of his antecedents nothing was known.

The other three were rough-looking bordermen, and acted as the friends of Dagger Don, as he was also sometimes spoken of.

The horseman took in the crowd at a glance, and met their gaze unflinchingly, while they saw before them a superb black horse with handsome trappings, and a rider over six feet in height, broad-shouldered, small-waisted, and with an air of suppleness about him that denoted strength and endurance above the average.

He was dressed in a serviceable hunting suit, wore a belt of arms, visible under his sack coat, and a rifle at his back, and a broad black sombrero sheltered his haughty head.

His face was calm, full of conscious power, and handsome, while his eyes were piercing, restless, and seemed to read one's very soul.

His chestnut hair fell in wavy masses nearly to his waist, and rested in a *neglige* manner upon his broad shoulders, and gave him a somewhat effeminate look, which his long black mustache hardly relieved until one examined well his features and saw upon each one imprinted daring and resolution.

"Well, sir, why not continue on your trail?" somewhat angrily said Dare Devil Don, gazing upon the horseman.

"This is Government land, and therefore free to all, and I am besides interested in the scene before me," was the cool reply.

"Well, see that you let your interest go no further than in looking on," said Don, and he turned to his adversary and continued:

"I demand another fire."

"I will have to use my left hand, then, sir, as you have crippled my right," was the low reply.

"Use what you please; but say when you are ready."

"I think my son should not again face you, Don Darrell, but let me take my turn now, as you insist upon settling this old grudge of the past between our fathers with pistols," and the old man walked forward.

"Your turn shall come, Major Hart, after I have killed your son; or, if he kills me, of course you escape."

The elderly man, addressed as Major Hart, paused, and, turning to his son, said, in a low tone:

"Fire lower this time, Horace, and try and rid the earth of that devil."

"I will do what I can, father, but you know I am no dead shot," and the youth calmly faced his adversary, and said:

"I am ready, sir."

"Come, Bitters," and Dare Devil Don turned to one of the three rough gentry behind him.

"All right, pard Don."

"Gents, is yer ready?" and the man answering to the name of Bitters stepped out to one side.

"Ready," came from the lips of each duelist.

"One! two! three! fire!"

Again two pistols flashed, and the youth's weapon dropped from his left hand, which went slowly to his heart, and he fell back a corpse in the arms of his father, who had sprung hastily to his side.

CHAPTER II.

THE STRANGER CHIPS IN.

"I AM now ready for you, sir."

The sinister voice of Dagger Don came to the ears of Major Hart, as he bent in deep grief over the body of his slain son.

Instantly he sprung to his feet, and there was a revengeful flash in his eyes, as he faced his enemy and said:

"And I am ready to meet you, murderer."

"Take your stand then," and Dagger Don motioned with his hand to a spot not far away.

"No, here on the spot where poor Horace stood, I will stand, and Heaven guide my bullet to your heart," said the major fervently, and drawing a revolver from his belt he faced his adversary, while, the Don having taken his stand, Bitters again asked the momentous question if both were ready, and slowly counted the fatal numbers.

Again two weapons flashed, and with a groan Major Hart staggered forward, but catching himself ere he fell he cried:

"You have wounded me, Darke Darrell, but I demand another fire."

"You shall have it, and welcome, Major Hart," was the somewhat exultant response.

"Permit me, sir, in the absence of any second for you, to act in your behalf," and the horseman sprung from his saddle and approached the major, who answered sadly:

"I thank you, sir, but with one more shot all will be over one way or the other."

"And I insist that you shall not meet this man, and I will take your place."

"You, a stranger, take my place?" gasped the major in astonishment.

"Oh yes, and why not, for you are wounded."

"But not so severely but that I can again face that man."

"I forbid it, sir, and if he demands another fire he shall face me," was the stern reply of the horseman.

"By Heaven! but I will face you for your interference, after I have again met this old man," said the Don with anger.

"It must be before, sir."

"What! do you dare dictate?"

"Most assuredly, where I see a murderer and a coward trying to kill a brave man, after having slain his son. I should have interfered before."

The words of the stranger fell like a thunderbolt upon the quartette of friends, and surprised the wounded man beyond expression.

It was evident that having interfered at last, he intended to run things his own way, and this Dagger Don saw and quickly said:

"I should shoot you where you— Hold!"

His sudden cry out in the midst of his speech to the stranger, was at seeing two revolvers leap from their holsters, and drop, one on him, the other at his three comrades, and remain presented without a quiver, while the horseman said calmly:

"Pray proceed, sir: you were saying you should shoot me where I stand, I believe?"

There was a quiet smile on the young horseman's face, and Dagger Don felt that they were fairly caught, for he certainly held the drop on them, and to end the affair, the former said:

"Well, sir, I will meet you now, and deal with Major Hart afterward, so take your stand, sir, and, Bitters, give the word."

"I'll take my stand, sir; but pardou me if I say I'll take no *Bitters* in mine."

"Major, as I have heard this man call you, will you kindly give the word to fire?"

Major Hart, who was leaning against a tree, evidently suffering from his wound, as his hand was pressed against his side, rallied quickly and said:

"Yes, I will give the word; but I regret you have gotten yourself into trouble on my account, sir."

"Do not speak of it, sir; as a wounded man you are in the position of a woman, and duty compels me to defend you."

"I am ready, Don—whatever—your—name—is, and Bitters, if you don't keep your hand off the butt of your revolver, I'll bore a hole through that ugly head of yours."

Bitters dropped his hand quickly, and it was evident that the cool courage of the stranger disconcerted the Don a little, as his face had become pale, and he seemed a trifle nervous as he took his stand.

Backing to his position the stranger let his left hand drop to his side, though still holding his revolver, and faced his adversary, his other weapon ready in his right.

"I object to your two weapons, sir," said the Don.

"Draw another yourself then, sir, for I will keep both of mine," was the calm reply.

Instantly the Don obeyed, and without allowing his restless eyes to lose sight of a single action of the Don and his two comrades, the stranger said:

"Now, major, I am ready."

"And I," repeated the Don.

"One! two! three! fire!"

The major spoke slowly and in distinct tones, and there were two reports, one a trifle before the other, and these were followed by a third, and two men fell to the ground.

CHAPTER III.

WILD BILL—THE PISTOL DEAD SHOT.

The two men who dropped at the three reports, were first, Dare Devil Don, and second, one of his three comrades, who had been raising his revolver to fire upon the stranger, whose eagle eye saw the act, and like a flash thwarted it by dropping him dead in his tracks, a bullet through his brain, while he remarked coolly:

"Well, Bitters, do you and your remaining pard wish to chip in too?"

"We pass, stranger pard, fer yer seems ter hold a full hand," was the significant answer.

"Yes, and can play trumps any time—hal the Don moves, so he cannot be dead."

His remark was occasioned by a sudden movement of Don Darrell, and then a convulsive sigh, after which he sat up and looked around him in a bewildered way.

With a bound the stranger was by his side, and tearing open his shirt front exposed to view a shirt of woven steel beneath.

"By the Rockies! but I knew I sent my bullet straight, for here it is, imbedded in your steel shirt, instead of in your coward heart."

"Next time, sir, I'll fire at your brain, and there will be no doubt: quick, leave here, or by Heavens, I'll make coyote food of you."

The stranger's eyes flashed fire, for he saw that he had faced a man wearing a metal shirt, impervious to a bullet, though the shock of the ball had knocked the breath from his body and temporarily stunned him.

The Don seemed yet somewhat dazed, but arose slowly to his feet, glanced with a shudder at the dead man slain by the horseman, and then said, as he turned his eyes upon him:

"Another time, sir stranger, we will meet again, but not now."

"It shall be now, if you don't leave here."

that I may look after this wounded victim of yours.

"Go, or by Heaven! your steel shirt won't save you."

A muttered curse broke from the lips of the Don, and he glanced toward his two comrades, evidently intending to urge them to aid him in an attack upon the stranger.

And it was evident that they understood his look, for Bitters said quickly and aloud:

"Tain't no use, pard Don: we is Vigilantes, I know; but that chap are a streak o' lightnin' on ther bounce, an' I am one who says that Bitters an' bullets don't mix worth a cent, so let's git, an' leave Red Head Doc here fer ther coyotes ter lunch on, unless ther stranger pard plays undertaker as well as killer."

"Cowards! we are three to one, for that old man has his death wound," hissed the Don.

"Yas, but he holds all ther trumps, ef he do play a lone hand, an' I are discreet, pard."

"You are a coward."

"Granted, pard Don, I'd rather be a live coward than a dead tiger, you bet, so let's take the stranger pard's advice and skip," said Bitters uneasily, and it was evident that the other was of the same way of thinking, and the Don was forced to yield.

But he turned toward the major, bending above his dead boy, and himself bleeding freely, and said threateningly:

"Old man, you had better die of the wound I gave you, for if you do not, I warn you that the Vigilantes will be on your trail."

"Begone, Darke Darrell, and leave me in peace with my dead," sternly said Major Hart.

"And you, sir stranger, will find Kansas an unhealthy place to live in, but a good place to die in, and it will not be long before the Vigilantes will be on your trail," and he faced the stranger.

"If you and your comrades don't leave here, there will be no one to tell who killed you," and the eyes of the young man blazed with anger, while Bitters cried anxiously:

"Come, Captain Don, or thar will be more cold meat lyin' 'round here fer buzzards' pickin'."

"Go yourselves, and I will follow, as soon as this gentleman has told me whom I have had the honor of meeting?" and the Don spoke with a sneer.

The answer came in deep, quiet tones:

"On the Missouri and Kansas border, men call me *Wild Bill, the Pistol Dead Shot*.

"Perhaps you have heard the name?"

It was evident that all had, for with a hasty bow, and in silence, the Don hurried on after his two comrades, while Major Hart turned from the dead body of his son and gazed upon the stranger with a look of surprised admiration.

CHAPTER IV.

THE VENDETTA.

AFTER the retreat of the Don and his comrades, Wild Bill, as he had said men called him, watched them mount their horses, hitched in the thicket near by, and ride away and then turned to Major Henry Hart, whose deep grief at the loss of his son seemed to outweigh his suffering from his wound.

Over the dead body bent the father, his hand pressed tightly upon his side, from which the life-blood was slowly welling.

"Come, sir, I have neglected you too long, so let me look at your wound and do what I can for you, and then I will see you home," said Wild Bill.

"Are you a surgeon, sir?"

"Oh no, but I have become rather familiar with wounds," and as he spoke he drew aside the coat and shirt, and critically examined the wound.

"The bullet has glanced on the rib, sir, and splintered it, but fortunately has not entered the body, though that fellow aimed true," remarked Wild Bill, and he hastily saturated a handkerchief with water from the stream, bound it over the wound and then led up the two horses of the father and son, which they had left in the timber.

"Now, major, mount, and I will carry your son," he said kindly, and he aided the old man into his saddle.

"And that body, sir," and the major pointed to the dead Vigilante.

"Oh! never mind him, for he's only fit for coyote food," was the indifferent reply, as he raised the dead youth in his arms, placed him across the back of his well-trained horse, and,

without touching his stirrup sprung into the saddle.

The major then led the way toward his home, and after they had ridden in silence for awhile, he said sadly:

"Ah! sir, it had been better had I fallen, and poor Horace lived, for he was young and had a noble heart, full of hope for the future, while I am nearly three score, and sorrow has dogged me bitterly of late years, and all I have left now is my daughter, who will bitterly grieve at the death of her poor brother, and at the hands of Darke Darrell."

"You know this Don well then?" queried Wild Bill.

"Alas! the Darrells and the Harts have had a vendetta for years.

"It began with Don Darrell's great grandfather and mine, and rivalry for a woman's love was the cause.

"Each generation one or more of the name were killed, and I killed his father in a duel twelve years ago.

"I was in the army then, and the pressure against me on that account forced me to resign and I came west with my family.

"I settled too near the border, and in an Indian raid my cattle were run off, and my home burned; but I rallied from the blow, and a year after my wife was killed from an ambush, while riding with me one afternoon.

"A year ago my daughter, Hazel, was captured by Indians, and that man, Darke Darrell, rescued her, and brought her back to my house, and from that day I felt that she loved him, and believed that he loved her.

"Not knowing him as other than Don Darke, I knew him not to be a Darrell, the son of the man I had killed, until one day the truth came out by his meeting at my house one who had known him well in Texas, and told of his evil deeds there.

"At once I forbade him the house, and then my sorrows began, for he threatened to take my daughter from me, and when I told him I would rather see her dead than his wife, he persecuted me, and at last forced poor Horace and myself to meet him in the fatal duel you witnessed.

"Had he killed me too, I fear the worst would have befallen poor Hazel, and, as it is, I live in dread of her being torn from me, for he is captain of the Vigilantes, and all fear him, in these parts, while his word is law.

"Now, sir, you know my sad history."

"And will be your friend against Don Darrell and his Vigilantes, so cheer up," said Wild Bill in his kindly way.

"Thank you, sir; there is my house, and you shall be welcome."

He pointed to a snug cabin home in the timber motte, and turned into a trail leading toward it.

As they drew near the house, a man dashed out, mounted upon a mustang, and cried in ringing tones:

"Hasten, major, for a band of masked men have been here and carried off Miss Hazel."

Major Hart attempted to speak, stretched forth his hands wildly, and with a deep groan reeled, and fell from his saddle as though dead.

CHAPTER V.

THE MASKED RIDERS.

WHEN Major Hart recovered consciousness he learned from his household servants that only a short while before his coming the Dagger Don and two men had dashed up, just as Miss Hazel was starting for a gallop over the prairie, and that she was boldly carried off by them, her cries for help there being no one to answer, except an old negro man, the herders being off on the prairie with the cattle.

Old Black Peter had gone at once after the herders, and several had arrived just as the major and Wild Bill appeared in sight.

"And where are they now, Peter?"

"Gone after Missy Hazel, sah."

"And that strange man who accompanied me here?"

"He were the first to go, sah, an' de herder boys followed him."

"And - and - my poor, dead boy!"

"Oh massa, it am awful to see poor Massa Horace dead, sah; but we hab laid him out in de parlor," and the old negro's voice trembled with emotion, for he had been in the family when the major was a little boy, and with old Nance, his wife, had followed his master's fortunes through trouble and sorrow.

"Massa, it am hor'ble, sah, to hab poor Massa Horace dead, an' dear Missy Hazel run

off with, an' you lyin' wounded, sah; but I hab sent for de doctor an' he'll fix you up all right in no time, for de wound am not dangerous, de han'some long-hair gentleman tolle me.

"Who am he, massa?"

"Wild Bill, men call him, Black Peter; I know him by no other name."

"Golly! am dat de man dat folkses says am a terner! Why he look tame as a cat ter gazat; but dey do say he am wilder den a Injun when dey turns him loose. I guesses he bring Missy Hazel back safe; but here am de doctor, sah," and Black Peter went out to meet the neighborhood practitioner who just then rode up, accompanied by the cowboy who had gone after him.

A short examination of the wound showed that it was not serious, though painful, for the rib had turned the ball, which had cut its way out again and was found in the major's clothing.

But the wound in the heart of the man the doctor could not cure, for his boy lay dead in the humble parlor, and his daughter had been torn from him by his worst enemy.

"You say that Captain Don carried Miss Hazel off, major?" asked Doctor Durango with marked surprise.

"So Black Peter, says," answered the major, who lay with his hands clasped over his eyes, as though to shut out some fearful sight therefrom.

"Yes, Massa Durango, he were de Don."

"Impossible, for he is the captain of the Vigilantes, who were formed to put down lawlessness in this community."

"It were him, sah, sure."

"Ah! I remember now that there has been a man, strangely like the Don, seen of late, and he has committed deeds that were at first laid to him; but were afterward proven false charges.

"Who this man is no one knows, or can find out; but certain it is that such an individual, sometimes accompanied by several comrades, has often been seen of late in the neighborhood."

"I will take oath that it is none other than the Vigilante captain himself, Doctor Durango, for he it was that killed my son and wounded me," said the major, excitedly, and seeing that he must keep his patient quiet, the doctor said no more, but promising to drop in upon the morrow, and also to make known to the rancheros the capture of Hazel Hart and the death of her brother, he mounted his horse and rode away.

Slowly the day drew near its close, and the sun was just touching the horizon when Black Peter came into the room where the stricken father lay wounded, and said:

"Massa, de grave am dug, sah, an' all am ready for de burial."

"Then I will go with you."

"No, no, massa, for de doctor say you must keep quiet," cried Peter, in alarm, as he saw the wounded man rise from his recumbent position.

"I will not let my boy be hidden from sight, without one to stand by his grave who loved him."

"Massa, I loves him, sah, and so do ole woman Nance," replied the old negro, reproachfully, and the major felt his words, for he answered quickly:

"Ah, my good Peter, well I know that you do, and have loved him ever since you held him a baby in your arms; but his mother is dead, his sister is - God only knows where, and I will see him put in his grave."

"Aid me to dress, Peter, for I am determined."

With a sigh the faithful old negro obeyed, and soon the little burial party left the pretty cabin home, and wended their way toward the spot in the timber where lay the body of Mrs. Hart.

Four cowboys carried the rude pine coffin, and behind it came the tottering father, leaning heavily upon black Peter for support, while old Nance brought up the rear, sobbing as though her own flesh and blood were being hidden forever from her sight.

Into the shallow grave the body was lowered, Black Peter, an old-time Methodist preacher in his former home, reciting the funeral services for the dead, and the father himself dropping the clods upon the coffin at the fateful words:

"Earth to earth, dust to dust, ashes to ashes."

The cowboys stood by with uncovered heads until old Peter, in trembling tones, concluded the service, and then hastily filled in the grave, after which they silently turned away, leaving the sorrowing, suffering father bending over the grave, the two old negroes standing respectfully apart, while the evening shadows gathered around them.

But better had it been for all had the four cowboys remained, for suddenly, out of the shadows of the timber, dashed five horsemen wearing masks, and hastily seizing Major Hart, who was unarmed and powerless to resist, bound him, threw him across the back of a led horse, and dashed away.

So rapid had been their movements, so prompt had been their action in thrusting pistols into the faces of the two negroes and commanding silence, that not a cry had been given, and almost in an instant's time the faithful old servants had been left standing alone by the grave, the clatter of retreating hoofs alone ringing in their ears.

CHAPTER VI.

VIGILANTE LAW.

WOUNDED and suffering, crushed with grief, and grown indifferent to life, or death, Major Hart seemed to care not whither his masked captors led him.

Each bound of his horse caused him anguish, and by the motion his wound became free of bandages, and once more began to bleed.

Who his captors were he could not guess, or why they sought to revenge themselves upon him, for that they felt bitterly toward him their cruel conduct plainly revealed, in their tearing him from the grave of his son, and binding him with thongs that cut into his flesh.

If it had been, as Black Peter had said, Don Darrell that had kidnapped Hazel, then it could not be the Vigilante captain that had him then in his power, for he felt that if Wild Bill was on his trail, he would not dare be in that neighborhood.

On they rode in silence, for the Masked Riders uttered no word, and only a groan of mingled anguish and grief broke now and then from the lips of the poor captive.

At last they drew rein suddenly upon the banks of a stream, and though it was night, Major Hart saw that it was the very spot where had been fought the duels a few hours before.

This looked like the work of Don Darrell, in bringing him to that fatal spot.

That he had brought him there to finish out his duel with him Major Hart now felt certain, and he determined in his own mind, if the Vigilante captain faced him again, to kill him, let his fate be what it might at the hands of his followers.

"Dismount, sir," sternly said a Masked Rider, approaching and unfastening the lariat that bound him to his horse.

"I am unable to, for I am bleeding from my wound and very weak," said the prisoner.

Instantly they lifted him from his saddle, and he found that he could hardly stand, and said eagerly:

"Quick, if Don Darrell intends to meet me in a duel, for I feel that I am failing fast."

A rude laugh was the response of several, while one, who appeared to be the leader, stepped forward and said:

"Henry Hart, you are to fight no duel with Darke Darrell; but he is to see you die, for you have been brought to this spot to be hanged to yonder tree."

"Great God! hanged!" burst from the lips of Major Hart.

"Yes," was the cruel, cold reply.

"Shoot me down! drive a knife into my heart, but do not hang me like a dog," he pleaded.

"No, you must die at the end of a rope."

"But how have I wronged you?"

"Greatly."

"Of what am I accused?"

"Murder."

"It is an infamous lie."

"You murdered Dorsey Darrell years ago."

"It is a lie; there had been a vendetta in our families for generations, and he, meeting me insulted me to cause me to challenge him."

"Well?"

"I did so."

"And killed him?"

"Yes."

"Then it was murder."

"It was a fair duello."

"It was murder, I repeat, and for it we have sentenced you to death."

"In Heaven's name, who are you?"

"Your judges."

"Yes, but what else?"

"Your executioners."

"I ask you who you are and what you are, that you avenge the death of Dorsey Darrell?"

The man before him slowly removed his hat, and a wealth of golden hair fell upon his broad shoulders.

"Good God!" broke from the lips of Major Hart.

Without noticing the exclamation, the man as slowly removed his mask.

"Don Darrell!" came in hoarse tones from Major Hart.

"Yes, Henry Hart, I am Dagger Don, the Vigilante captain."

"Curses forever rest upon you, Darke Darrell, for you have taken from me my poor child," groaned the bound man.

"Ay, and now I intend to take your life."

"That rope here, boys."

Two willing tools stepped forward and threw the lariat's noose around the head of their victim, from whose lips again came the cry:

"Shoot me, but do not let me die thus."

"You must hang, Henry Hart—ha! hold him up there, for he is falling."

But Major Hart recovered himself quickly, and hissed forth:

"It is weakness from loss of blood, Darke Darrell, and not fear, for I will face death with a bolder heart than you can when you come to die."

"I have no intention of dying for a long time yet, Major Hart."

"Oh, no, I shall live, and yet lower in the dust the head of your proud daughter."

"Up with him there, boys, for we lose time!"

The other end of the lariat was thrown over a large limb of a tree, and the four tools of the Vigilante captain seized it and drew hard upon it.

"If you have prayers to say, Henry Hart, be quick about them, for you have but one minute of life upon earth."

The doomed man made no reply; his head was bent, his chin resting upon his breast, and his hands were securely bound behind him.

"Are your prayers ended, Henry Hart?"

No answer was given, and then came the fatal words:

"Drag him up, boys, and make your end fast."

Up into the air went the form, some ten feet above the ground, the end of the lariat was tied around a sapling, and the Vigilante executioners rode away at a rapid gallop, leaving their victim swaying to and fro like a huge pendulum.

CHAPTER VII.

THE LOST TRAIL.

WHEN Wild Bill heard the news of Hazel Hart's capture, and saw Major Hart fall from his saddle, he told the cowboy to bear the unconscious man to the house, and, learning which way the kidnappers had gone, started in pursuit, just as several of the herders of the ranch, well mounted and armed, dashed up and asked to join him.

Readily he consented, and at a swift pace they rode away, Wild Bill, with the cunning of an Indian, following the trail at a gallop.

The cowboys knew not who he was, but were struck with admiration at his splendid physique and daring, reckless and handsome face, and felt that he was some friend of their employer, the major, and readily followed his lead.

But though he held steadily on, no view of the kidnappers could be seen across the prairie, although their trail was fresh, the cowboys pointing out the well-known tracks of Hazel's mare, Gipsy.

At length a range of bold hills came in sight, at whose base ran a swift stream, and upon arriving at its banks all trace of the trail was lost.

They could readily see where the kidnappers and their captive, five in number, had gone in the stream; but not a trace was there visible of their coming out upon the other bank.

Determined not to lose time, Wild Bill at once ordered two of the cowboys to cross the stream and reconnoiter the hills for a couple of hours, and then return to that point if they made no discoveries, but to return at once if they did discover anything of importance, and one ride up the other down the creek after

him and the other two herders, whom he sent up on each bank to search for the coming out of the kidnappers.

"I will proceed down the stream, following the water, and if I make no discovery will return here in a couple of hours," he said.

"An' ef yer does come up with ther devils, pard?" asked a cowboy.

"Then I will deal with them to the best of my ability," was the calm reply, and the party separated, two crossing into the hills, two going up the stream, and Wild Bill following the creek along its bed, his splendid horse seeming not to care for the rushing waters.

But two hours passed away, and first the explorers of the hills returned and then the others who had gone up the stream, and none had any report to make, for no trace had been discovered in the timber hill-and, and no trail had been seen of where the fugitives had left the water.

"Like as not that han'some, long-hair feller will diskiver more than all of us," said one.

"I reckon, pard, fer he works like one as sees what kin be seen; does yerhev a idee who he are?" responded and inquired another.

"Nary idee; only I'd like ter see him in a scrimmage, fer it seems ter me durned likely he'd call in chips an' pile up cold meat durn lively— By the Rockies, he are at it now!"

The last words were uttered at suddenly hearing rapid pistol-shots, coming from not far away down the stream, and a few wild yells.

"By Jemima! but that's music we must jine in, fer we knows ther tune," cried another, and throwing themselves upon their mustangs, deep were driven the spurs, and the four cowboys sped away in the direction of the firing.

A ride of several hundred yards brought them upon a scene that surprised them, for they beheld their strange leader dismounted, and one foot upon a struggling wretch, while he was tying with remarkable ease what appeared to be an Indian warrior, wholly unmindful of his desperate efforts to escape.

Only a few paces distant lay three more hideously painted human beings, who had fallen under his deadly aim.

"Waal, pard stranger, yerhev struck it rich," cried one of the cowboys.

"Three with ther toes turned up, an' two in a durned unhealthy grip," said another.

"Injuns as got tuk in," remarked a third.

"They are not Indians, but renegade whites in war-paint, and I have been on their trail for days."

"Here, put your lariat around this fellow's neck and we'll hang him," said Wild Bill coolly.

"Is yer gwine ter string 'em?" asked a cowboy.

"Yes, for they are not fit to live, as only a week ago this very gang robbed and killed a friend of mine on the Solomon, and I swore to avenge him, and the oath is almost kept."

"It are fer a fact," said a cowboy, while another asked:

"Did they tackle yer, pard?"

"No, I saw their camp yonder, and rode in on them."

"Yer has backbone clean down ter yer heels ter do it: waal, shall we h'ist 'em?"

"Yes."

"Wild Bill, for God's sake spare me!" cried one of the paint-begrimed prisoners.

"Wild Bill! whar are he?" asked a cowboy.

"There he stands: beg him to spare my life; for I am not fit to die."

"You hain't no kin o' ounr, pard: but is you Wild Bill the Pistol Dead Shot?" and as the cowboy turned toward the man he addressed the other three gazed upon him with something like awe.

"So men call me," was the quite reply, while a slight smile crossed his face.

"I thought yer wasn't any ordinary geroot; fer yer didn't look it."

"I offers yer my claw, pard Bill, as a friend."

"And I accept it as such; now let us get this unpleasant duty off of our bands," and Wild Bill again turned to the trembling wretches, wholly heedless to their cries for mercy.

"You ask me in vain for mercy, for I know you as you are, and had I not come upon you as I did, you would soon have had your paint washed off, and with the gold you stole from old Abram Carter, have settled down as honest men."

"But I have trumped your plays, and up you go."

"If I tell you, Wild Bill, where we have hidden the gold you will spare me?" whined one.

"Not I, for I can easily find it."

"Never! no man kin do that," said the renegade triumphantly.

"I'll take the chances on that, and if I don't it will not be much loss to me, and old Carter had no one to leave it to that I know of. No, up you go, I say!"

"Mercy, Dead Shot!"

"Mercy, Bill!"

Unheeding the cries of the wretches, Wild Bill adjusted the rope around the neck of one and gave the signal for the cowboys to hoist him up.

Promptly they obeyed and the tightening rope shut off the cries of the doomed wretch.

With holy horror his companion gazed upon the swaying form, his face as pallid as a corpse, and from his quivering lips came the cry:

"Remember, Bill, I saved your life once."

"Ay, and three times have I spared yours in return, so that debt is paid; but to show I remember it, I'll not hang you—"

"Bless you Bill, bless—"

"But let you die by a pistol-shot. Here!"

He held forth his revolver as he spoke, and with his other hand cut the bonds that pinioned the captive's arm.

"What's it for, Bill?"

"To shoot yourself with," was the cool reply.

"Shoot myself with?" gasped the wretch.

"Yes, unless you prefer to hang."

"I don't prefer it, I don't want to die any way."

"But you must."

"Mercy, Bill!"

"I say no! Take this revolver and kill yourself with it, or up you go alongside of your pard!"

The man looked at Wild Bill, then at the cowboys, and as though feeling that his doom was certain, he seized the pistol, and thrusting it forward, full at the heart of Wild Bill, pulled the trigger.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TREACHEROUS SHOT.

AT the sudden and unexpected act of the renegade, the four cowboys were horrified, and as they saw Wild Bill stagger backward, they felt that the assassin had well done his red work.

But ere they could even utter a cry, or spring toward him, the renegade had quickly reversed the pistol and placing the muzzle over his own heart pulled the trigger, crying out as he did so:

"Ha! ha! ha! I die, but you go with me, Wild Bill."

With the report he dropped heavily to the ground and writhed in mortal agony, while, to the surprise and delight of the cowboys Wild Bill did not fall, but advanced with steady step and gazed down upon the dying man, while he said in his calm way:

"You are mistaken, for my good fortune did not desert me, as the shot you fired at me was harmless, I not having had time to put a bullet in that barrel of my revolver, and a scratched spot over my heart is all the inconvenience I suffer, while you will not live five minutes."

"Oh, curse you, Wild Bill!" gasped the man.

"Curses from such men as you, are blessings to me, pard."

Half awed by the scene the cowboys gazed upon the writhing, dying renegade, and then bent their gaze earnestly upon the strange man of whom they had heard so much.

A moment of silence followed, and then, with a shriek of anguish at his fate, the soul of the renegade escaped from the body and he was dead.

"Shall we bury them, pard?" asked Nebraska Ned, the chief of the cowboys on the Hart ranch.

"Yes, if so you will, for bad as they were there are some in the wide world who love them, and it would be a sad thought for them to feel that they were left for coyote food after death, and no grave was theirs."

"Yes, bury them, pards, and then go back to the ranch," and Wild Bill spoke with sadness in his voice.

"And you, Wild Bill?" asked Nebraska Ned.

"Oh! I have struck a trail, and after dark will follow it alone."

"Better let us go with you!"

"No, I must play a lone hand in this case, and if I mistake not I hold trumps."

"I hope yer does, an' ef report about yer says true you allus holds 'em."

"I generally try to keep my end up with the boys, pard; but, tell the major I hope to bring good news soon. Good-by," and calling to his horse, which was feeding near, the faithful animal came trotting to his side, and mounting, Wild Bill rode slowly away, turning the head of his horse down-stream.

The cowboys watched him until he was out of sight, then quietly searched the dead renegades for any valuables they might have about them, and were so well rewarded with their find, that Nebraska Ned said cheerily:

"Boys, we'll dig ther grave a foot deeper, as they hes panned out so well, fer 'twon't do to let ther coyotes gnaw 'em."

"No, they hes did well by us, an' we'll give 'em a good send-off ter Brimstone Land; but what lead are thet wild feller bound on I wonder?"

"Thar's no tellin', pard; but hain't he a terner?"

"He are," was the general opinion, so expressed, and with this idea of Wild Bill, they set to work digging a grave for the renegades.

CHAPTER IX.

A DOUBLE DISCOVERY.

As though he had already decided upon his plan, Wild Bill, upon leaving the scene where he had so narrowly escaped death, by the shot of the renegade, and where he had left the victims of his deadly aim, urged his horse into the stream at a point half a mile below where he left the cowboys.

For a mile or more he held on through the swiftly gliding current until he came to where a large flat rock divided the waters, and only some fifteen feet from the right bank, which was a couple of yards above his head, as he sat on his horse, and too steep to scale, for it was perpendicular.

Behind this narrow shelf or rock arose a bold cliff, here and there broken by a hardy tree clinging in its crevices, and seamed in several places with fissures.

To an ordinary eye the cliff and steep hill, which was the spur of a ridge broken by the stream, would appear wholly impassable to a horse, and almost so to the foot of man; but Wild Bill was up to all the arts of border cunning, and his trained eye had detected something upon his former trip down the stream, which he knew demanded investigation.

It was while engaged in exploring the hill that he had seen the renegades pass in the distance, and unseen by them had followed them to where they had just gone into camp, and with the result the reader already knows.

Now, as he reached the rock that divided the stream he halted, while the waters rising above his stirrups hurried by like a mill-race.

After eying the rock for an instant he muttered:

"This is the rock they leave the stream by, for here are the marks of iron hoofs upon it; now to discover their little game."

Wheeling his horse to the right, he rode close in toward the bank, unfastened his lariat, and after whirling it around his head, dexterously threw it upon the end of a broken limb of one of the stunted pines growing on the hillside.

Then he urged his horse close against the bank, although the stream deepened to his saddle-girth, and rising to his feet with the aid of the lariat drew himself upon the rocky shelf.

Relieved from his master's weight the horse was almost swept from its footing, but managed to brace himself with sufficient force to resist the current, the faithful animal seeming to understand that he must aid in the work of exploration.

Once upon the shelf and Wild Bill gave a low whistle, for he had made a discovery.

Just behind a point of rocks was a narrow bridge of stout planks, upon each side of which were railings three feet high, as guards, and upon the flooring were nailed cleats, while ropes arranged with blocks and tackle were ingeniously contrived so that one man could lower the whole arrangement into position.

It required Wild Bill but an instant to learn the ropes, and then he readily drew the bridge out of its crevice and saw that it could be lowered so that one end would rest upon the rocky shelf and the other upon the boulder in the stream.

A close examination then revealed a chain

passing over the shelf, down into the stream, and so across to the rocky platform, which, when pulled hard upon, would draw across a narrow plank, upon which a man could easily reach the shore, and then drawing it back again, lower the bridge for his horse.

"Well, this is the best I ever saw," muttered Wild Bill, and after a moment he continued:

"I'll go and get a few good fellows and come and break up this nest, for I guess there are more birds in it than I care to tackle alone."

He then replaced the bridge as he found it, unfastened the lariat from the limb, merely passing it around so he could draw it away, and seizing the ends swung over the shelf and regained the back of his patiently waiting horse.

"Come, Eucher, we'll go back and tell the major we know where his daughter is, and tonight we'll come back and break up this nest," he said, as he wheeled the intelligent animal out of the stream, and started in a bee-line for the ranch, for Wild Bill could hit a locality on a trail, as readily as he could dead center with his revolvers.

Night overtook him ere he reached within half a dozen miles of the Hart ranch, and, as his horse had been pushed hard during the day, he drew him down to a walk.

"Yes, I am right, for this is the scene of the duel this morning," he muttered, and was riding into the timber, when his horse suddenly gave a snort, and a violent bound to one side.

"What is it, Eucher?"

A continued snorting of the horse was the only response, and he was quivering in every limb.

"What! are you frightened at the Vigilante I shot this morning? Why, Eucher, you are not losing your nerve, I hope, to be scared at a dead body? Come, old boy, move on."

Thus urged the animal moved forward, but evidently with reluctance, and soon, in the darkness, an object brushed against the knee of the rider.

Instantly his hand grasped it with a grip of iron, and then from his lips came the words:

"By Heaven! it is a man hanging to this tree."

"There has been Devil's work going on here."

Taking a match from his box he ignited it, and held it up to the face of the man.

"Good God! it is Major Hart," he cried in a tone of excitement he never allowed himself to be guilty of; but the discovery for the moment unmanned him.

CHAPTER X.

WILD BILL'S OATH.

HAVING discovered who was the victim of a cruel wrong, it was but the work of an instant for Wild Bill to draw his knife and sever the rope that upheld the form.

"Ha! he is still warm, so that the hanging has been lately done."

"Yes, and his pulse beats, though very faintly; but I may be able to revive him."

Leaving Eucher to feed at will on the rich grass, Wild Bill laid Major Hart upon the mossy bank of the stream, and pressed between his teeth a swallow of whisky from his canteen.

Then he rubbed his neck, arms and back violently, and dashed a hatful of water into his face.

It was a long, long time before the pulse quickened, and then only slightly; but Wild Bill was untiring in his efforts, and at last there was a sigh, the lips parted, and in a feeble voice there came the words:

"Where am I?"

"Safe, Major Hart, for you are with me, Wild Bill."

"Wild Bill! yes, I remember; you fought the duel for me some weeks ago."

"It was this morning, major."

"Ah! it seems to me weeks ago; but I remember now, my boy was killed, and you went after Hazel."

"Yes, major, and have trailed the devils to their den."

"And she is safe?" eagerly asked the poor man.

"Yes, or soon will be, so you must rally, and—"

"No, I am dying."

"Nonsense, major; you have been treated badly and all that; but you will come out all right."

"No, I am dying, for I have bled to death,

and—oh, God! now I recall all—I was banged by Dagger Don."

"He did this, did he?" said Wild Bill, in low tones.

"Yes; he took me from the side of my boy's grave and brought me here, and has threatened to drag my poor, friendless daughter into the dust."

"Never! I will protect her," was the firm reply.

"Thank God for those words, for I feel she will indeed have a friend in you; but he is all powerful, as the Vigilante captain."

"I care not; I shall thwart him at every turn."

"God grant it, and help you, my noble friend; but swear to me that you will save her."

"I swear it."

"Enough; now I can die content; but first—"

"But you will not die, but live to see that I keep my oath."

"No, I am dying; I have not been well of late, and this wound, and that cruel rope have killed me, for see, I am unable to move hand or foot."

It was true; his limbs and body had suddenly become paralyzed, and life only fluttered in the heart and brain.

Pained by this discovery Wild Bill sought to bring back circulation, and went to the stream to give him a cool draught of water.

In a moment almost he returned and held the water to the lips of the stricken man.

But even he, strong as he was, and used to death in its worst forms, started back, for he knew that he was in the presence of the dead, the spark of life having gone out like the flame of a candle.

Major Hart was dead—murdered; his son was dead—murdered; and his daughter—alas, where was she and what was to be her fate?

CHAPTER XI.

THE TRAIL THROUGH THE HILLS.

As he had done with the son, killed by Don Darrell in the duel, Wild Bill took the body of Major Hart on his horse before him, and rode slowly toward the ranch.

Arriving there he found, from Black Peter, that the cowboys had returned, and had then gone to arouse the neighbors to aid in the search for Hazel Hart.

Giving into the care of the faithful negro and his wife, the body of his master, Wild Bill allowed Eucher a short rest and a good meal, and then set forth upon his return to the hills, having determined, as it would take hours to get a force together, to follow the trail at once, and trust to his own pluck and circumstances to rescue the maiden.

He reached the stream shortly before dawn, boldly entered it, and gaining the rock that divided the waters felt for the chain, and finding it, soon drew the footplank across to where he stood.

Leaving Eucher standing in the water he crossed to the shore, and after a short delay lowered the bridge.

The steed showed some signs of alarm at seeing the swinging bridge coming toward him, but a low word from his master quieted his fears, and, crossing to the rock, Wild Bill led the animal upon it.

With little hesitation the intellectual beast followed his master across the narrow bridge, which was then raised and returned to its crevice in the cliff.

On foot Bill then sought to find a path into the hills, and this he soon did, and in a few moments' time came to a small valley overhung by a lofty cliff.

Seeking one end of this secluded vale, he threw himself down upon his blanket to rest until morning; well knowing that his horse would awaken him if danger threatened, he slept soundly, and was only aroused by the rising sun casting its rays in his face.

"Well, Eucher, we've had a few hours' rest, and you've breakfasted, I see, so I'll take a bite," he said, addressing his horse, which had become as a companion to him.

A rivulet near by showed him where he could freshen himself with a bath, and having done so, he ate some cold meat and bread, took a draught from his canteen, and saddled Eucher to further continue his explorations.

A search of half an hour brought him to the mouth of a large cavern, which permitted him to enter on horseback; but, dismounting, he took from his pocket a match and candle, and

thus armed with a light, penetrated into the tunnel-like way.

The traces on the rocky flooring showed him that the cavern was often used, for there were iron hoof-marks upon it, and he went along with the greatest caution.

But no larger cavern presented itself to his view, only the continuance of the tunnel-like cave, while here and there another aisle would branch off upon the right or left.

For half a mile had he gone, and then ahead of him he saw daylight, and at once put out his candle and advanced with the utmost caution.

But he reached the end of the cave, and saw that he had simply passed under the range of wild and rugged hills, which he well knew had no pass through them for many miles upon either side of where he had entered.

Before him he saw a lonely valley, with a loftier range of mountains beyond, and above the tree tops on their sides, miles away, he beheld a number of columns of blue smoke curling lazily upward.

"A Sioux encampment, by the glory of the Rockies!" he exclaimed.

Then, after a few moments' silence, in which his eagle eyes swept the valley, the hills he had passed under, which towered far above his head, and the mountains beyond, he continued:

"Well, I think I have made a discovery, and I shall follow the lead I have taken to bed-rock.

"Those Vigilantes, Renegades, Regulators, or whatever they call themselves, have no den in these mountains, that is certain, only, having discovered this tunnel, they use it to their advantage, and, if I mistake not, are in league with the red-skins. Anyhow, I shall soon know, for I camp on this trail until something turns up—ha! there comes some one on horseback."

He quickly took from a saddle pocket a field-glass and turned it upon the point, a couple of miles away, where his keen eye had detected something in motion.

"Yes, there are four of them, and they are Indians, and heading down the valley.

"As soon as they are hidden by the timber again, I will head them off."

He had not long to wait before the four horsemen disappeared from sight once more, going at an easy gait toward the valley.

Instantly at a trot Wild Bill started down the hillside, Eucher following him closely.

Picking his way, he turned into a canyon, which he considered the best trail to follow, but suddenly started back, his hands fairly flashing his revolvers from his belt, and instantly the rocky glen rung with the rattle of fire-arms.

But once he began to fire, Wild Bill sprung forward, instead of backward, and leaping over the bodies of two men he had slain, he came upon three more, who had suddenly darted out from a narrow ravine.

"Sur—ender, or you die!" cried one of the three, in ringing tones, throwing his pistol forward to fire.

But, ere it reached a level, it was knocked from his hand by a bullet, and his arm fell, helpless, to his side, while Wild Bill covered the hearts of the other two, and said calmly:

"This is my treat, pards, so what'll you take, life or death?"

"You has ther drop, so it's fer you ter call," sullenly answered one.

"Then drop your weapons, both of you!"

The two men hastily unbuckled their belts and cast them one side, while the third, who was tenderly nursing his shattered hand, said sullenly:

"Curse you, I've got your mark for life."

"I'll put you out of your misery, if you prefer it, pard," was the cool reply.

"Curse you, no! But who the devil are you, and what do you want, coming into a peaceful camp as you have done?"

"It don't look very peaceful, pard, with you bleeding, and those two gents with turned-up toes; but it's a way I have of doing, and I'm awful glad I come."

"What do you want?"

"I'm out calling, and would like to know if Miss Hazel Hart is at home?"

"What do you know of her?" quickly asked the seeming leader of the party, glancing at his two comrades, who stood dejectedly by.

"Is she here?"

"No."

"I've a notion to clip your lying tongue, and if you don't tell me where she is, I'll do it."

"Do you see that ravine?" and the man pointed to a gap in the canyon.

Wild Bill turned his head to look, when, quick as a flash, the man thrust his hand into the bosom of his hunting-shirt, and drawing forth a small pistol, fired.

CHAPTER XII.

ROBIN RED-BREAST.

At the shot of the ruffian, Wild Bill's pistol dropped from his hand, and it was evident that he was wounded; but, without an instant's hesitation, he raised his left hand, which held a revolver, and at the report the man fell dead, a bullet in his brain, while his two comrades, who were rushing upon their foe, believing him at their mercy, stopped short with a suddenness that was ludicrous, and cries that were piteous for him to spare them.

"I've a mind to kill you both," he said, sternly.

"Don't do it, pard, fer we hain't no weapons hid."

"Shuck yourselves quick, so that I can see."

With astounding rapidity they obeyed, shaking their woolen shirts violently to show that no deadly weapons were concealed within their folds.

"All right; put on your rig again, or you might catch cold and die, and I prefer that you should live to be hanged."

"Oh, pard, what hev we done?" cried one innocently.

"Where is the maiden you stole from her home?"

"Up the ravine yonder."

"Ah! Is she alone?"

"Ther horses are with her."

"Why did you kidnap her?"

"Orders, pard."

"From whom?"

"The boss."

"What's his name?"

"They calls him cap'n: that's all I know him by."

"Captain what?"

"No, jist cap'n."

"And do you know him by no other name?"

and Wild Bill turned to the other ruffian.

"Nary!"

"Where is he now?"

"Don't know."

"When did you see him last?"

"Yesterday."

"Where?"

"Here."

"He came here?"

"Sure."

"Alone?"

"Nary, he had the gal an' some pards with him."

"And he left her with you?"

"Yes."

"What were you to do with her?"

The men remained silent.

"I asked what were you to do with the lady?"

"You kilt the boss an' be know'd."

"And you know too, so answer me."

"Shall we, Buck?" asked one of the other.

"What terms will yer give us, pard?"

"A bullet in your brain if you don't."

"Lordy! I'll talk, I will!"

"I'll sing, too."

"See that you do! What were you to do with the maiden?"

"Keep her heur until called for."

"By whom?"

"A Injun chief as is a white man."

"What?" asked Wild Bill in surprise.

"Hes yer ever heard o' Robin Red Breast, as ther Ingins call him?"

"Yes: he is a white man, a renegade, who is chief of a Dog Soldier Sioux band, and a most infamous devil."

"Yer hes got him down fine as silk, pard. Waal, he ar' the man."

"And what were you to give the maiden to him for?" sternly asked Wild Bill.

The man who had been the speaker glanced at his comrade, who, seemingly understanding his look, said:

"Spit it out, pard, fer talk are cheaper than funerals."

"Yer is right. Waal, pard, yer see ther Robin Red Breast hev been in love with ther Queen o' ther Sioux, whose name are Ma-ree which means Red Dove—"

"I have heard of her."

"So I reckons, fer she are a screamer fer beauty."

"Go on with your story."

"Oh, I'm a-sputtin' it: as I were discoursin', ther Red Breast are in love with ther Red Dove, but ther Black Bear, the great medicine chief o' the Sioux, don't like him, no more than does ther Dove, an' they set him adrift, which made him mad, an' he swore ter git ther gal."

"But just then he see ther darter o' Major Hart, the same as we hev up ther canyon yonder, an' he got dead gone on her, same as our cap'n, who see ther Red Dove got broke up with love fer her, an' ther two concluded ter make a trade."

"A trade?"

"Yes, pard, a swap."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that ther cap'n hed it prime ter git ther white gal, an' ther Red Breast hed it so as he c'd git ther Red Dove, an' they agreed ter captur ther gals an' swap."

"Ther cap'n did his part o' ther job an' left us hear with ther pale face leddy, an' we is waitin' fer ther Red Breast Robin, who were ter git ther red-skin leddy an' fetch her here, an' it were ter be a fair swap. Now, pard, yer hes ther Gospil o' it."

"And thank Heaven I came as I did to thwart the vile deviltry."

"You hev did it, or I don't know stiffs when I sees 'em layin' 'round permiscuous like."

"Tell me, does the Robin Red Breast know who is to bo here to make the exchange?" suddenly asked Wild Bill.

"Guess not, pard."

"Then you obey me in this matter and I'll see you do not suffer."

"Praise the Lordy fer that, pard."

"I'll receive the Red Dove, and then let matters adjust themselves."

"Whew! thar is goin' ter be music, or I am a lyin' Chinee," muttered one of the ruffians, and the other said:

"I is on ther side o' ther uppermost dog in ther scrimmage."

"R-move those bodies," and Wild Bill pointed to the dead men he had slain.

"Whar shell we put 'em, pard?"

"Out of sight anywhere."

The men obeyed, throwing their dead comrades into a clump of bushes.

"Now come down the canyon with me."

Silently they obeyed.

A walk of half a hundred yards brought them to the ravine, and into this Wild Bill turned, closely following his prisoners.

A few steps had they gone, when half a dozen horses were discovered, one wearing a side-saddle, and beneath a scrub pine near by, and securely bound to it, was a maiden, attired in a dark blue riding-habit.

She glanced quickly up with a look of terror, at beholding the two ruffians, and half sprung to her feet, as she caught sight of the splendid looking man following them.

One glance into his face, and she seemed to read there that she had a friend, for she cried earnestly:

"Oh, sir, you have come to save me from those wretches!"

CHAPTER XIII.

HAZEL AND RED DOVE.

WHEN the captive maiden arose at his coming, Wild Bill beheld before him a form of rare grace and beauty, the hands bound tightly behind her back, and a face of exquisite loveliness, though of almost deathly pallor.

Her soft sombrero, with its sable plume, had fallen from her head, and lay at her feet, and masses of golden curls were revealed, while her eyes were dark blue, and full of tenderness, though as he gazed into them, he saw there a pleading, bunted look.

"Yes, Miss Hart, I have come to save you," he said in his deep, low tones.

"You know me, it seems, sir; am I so remiss as to forget that we have met before?" she asked softly.

"No, we have never before met, Miss Hart, but I am your friend, and have been on the trail of your captors."

"I heard firing awhile since, and your sleeve has blood on it," she said anxiously.

"A slight wound, which I will trouble you to bandage for me, if you will be so kind, as soon as I have attended to a little matter on hand," and as he spoke he freed the maiden of her bonds, while one of the outlaws remarked to the other:

"A leetle matter, he calls it, pard. Waal, if I hain't wrong it will be a 'arthquake, when

ther Robin comes up with ther Dove, an' they is about due now."

"Yas, an' ther Robin will git picked o' his pin-feathers, I'm a considerin'," was the reply of his comrade.

"Hark!"

At the command, from the lips of Wild Bill, all listened, and distinctly to their ears came the sound of hoof-falls.

"Miss Hart, if I seem cruel in what I do, rest assured that I know what a heinous crime was intended against you, and that the one I deal with is a human monster," explained Wild Bill quickly, and turning to his two captives he continued sternly:

"Remember, you side with me in this trouble, men."

"Yas, pard, I are with you."

"And me too," were the answers of the two, though the villainy in their faces indicated that they would be treacherous if it suited their interest better.

Darting down to the mouth of the ravine, Wild Bill saw coming what at first appeared to be four Indian warriors mounted upon mustangs, but which a second glance revealed as two Indian braves, a maiden, and a white man, in the war toggery of a chief.

It was the same party he had seen across the valley half an hour before, and he knew that lie saw before him the renegade white chieftain of the Dog Soldier Sioux, two of his warriors, and Red Dove the Sioux Queen, as the Indian maiden was called, since two years before she had discovered a war-party of Cheyennes marching against the village of her people, and had ridden back and given warning in time to turn what would have been a victory for their foes into a total defeat.

At the sight of Wild Bill the party quickly came to a halt, but he held up his hands, the palms turned toward them in token of peace, and they rode forward, though on their guard.

As they came to a halt the Robin Red Breast suddenly cried out:

"Jim Hikok! Good God!"

In an instant he had recognized him, as one he had met before, and though his Indian rig disguised him beyond the recognition of Wild Bill, he saw that the man had some cause to fear him, and the hands of the two dropped upon their revolvers.

There followed several rapid shots, wild yells, the falling of horses, trampling of feet, and away dashed the Red Breast upon the back of one of the mustangs before ridden by a warrior, for his own steed had fallen, and springing forward Wild Bill had caught the maiden in his arms, for he had shot her pony, just as the renegade chief was about to dash away with her.

All had happened so suddenly that Hazel Hart hardly knew what had transpired, though she had been a witness of the fracas.

Then she saw three mustangs lying upon the ground in the entrance to the ravine, a warrior dead, another writhing in death-agonies, and heard the clatter of hoofs up the canyon, as the Red Breast sped away, while Wild Bill stood calmly in the midst, and by his side was Red Dove, the beautiful Indian maiden.

Then she looked around for the two white men, who had promised to be the allies of Wild Bill, and saw that they had taken advantage of the fight to make themselves scarce,

"The great white chief has saved the Red Dove from a wicked foe of her people," said the Indian maiden in good English, turning her dark, lustrous eyes upon Wild Bill, who mentally decided, as he gazed upon the slender willowy form, in its gorgeous, barbaric dress, and the perfect, proud features, and bronzed skin, that the report of Red Dove's beauty had not been exaggerated.

"Yes, and I too owe him more than life," said Hazel advancing and joining them, and the maidens, the pale-face and the red-skin, gazed upon each other with admiration, though in both hearts was a tinge of jealousy that the other owed to the splendid-looking man standing near their preservation.

"It was a devilish plot, between Robin Red Breast and Dagger Don the Vigilante captain to exchange you, the one for the other, and I am glad I thwarted their little game. "But this is not a healthy neighborhood, as the Red Breast may have other warriors near, so let us depart," warned Wild Bill.

"The Red Dove would return to her people," said the Indian maiden calmly.

"Is there a village across the valley on the mountain side?"

"Yes, great chief: she was taken near there by the Red Breast, through the treachery of a young warrior of her own tribe whom she did not love."

"Do you fear to go alone?"

"No, the Red Dove has no fear."

"Then I will transfer your trappings from your mustang to one of the horses of those white devils who deserted me in the fight; but I guess they acted for their own good, as I might have lost patience with them soon."

With this remark, significant of harm to the two captives who had decamped, Wild Bill selected the best of the lot of horses for Red Dove, and soon had him ready for the maiden, and raised her lightly to his back.

"Good-by, white chief, and the Red Dove will not forget you," she said, holding out her hand to Wild Bill, and without another word, or a look at Hazel, she darted away up the canyon and disappeared from sight.

"Now, Miss Hart, I will be glad to escort you to your home," and Wild Bill spoke sadly, for well he knew how bitter would be the tidings he had to tell her as they rode toward that desolate home.

Tying the horses of the outlaws together Wild Bill raised Hazel to her saddle, and driving the loose animals ahead, mounted Eucher, and set out for Hart Ranch, happy in having secured the maiden, but pained beyond expression at the sad tidings he felt he must make known to her.

CHAPTER XIV.

MAKING HIMSELF KNOWN.

I WILL not dwell upon the bitter anguish of Hazel Hart, in returning to her home, to find that her father and brother lay side by side in their graves.

From Wild Bill, who broke the sad tidings as kindly as such bitter news could be told, she heard all, and to him she seemed to cling as her only friend, and he advised her to still remain upon the ranch, which was just beginning to bring in good returns, and simply keep within call of the house several cowboys, in case she should need them at any time.

"As for the Vigilante captain, I guess he won't trouble you any more, for there are good men in these parts, who will check his high-handed acts," he said.

"And you?" she asked.

"Oh! I like this part of the country and intend to locate here.

"There is a pretty spot over here in the hills, half a dozen leagues away, which I intend to make my home, although I have heard from the cowboys that they say the place is haunted."

"What! you don't mean the Haunted Ranch?" asked Hazel, in surprise and with alarm.

"Yes, miss; the land was located by Rathburn, a ranchero, I learn, and he and his family were killed there shortly after they had built a comfortable cabin to live in."

"Yes, that is the place, and no one knows who killed them, and the heir of Mr. Rathburn also lost his life there."

"Then a ranchero, who bought it of the next heir, was killed in the same mysterious way, and next a cowboy, who were to live, was found dead several days later. Oh! you will not go there," said Hazel, earnestly.

"Indeed I will."

"But they tell such strange stories of weird forms seen there at night by all who follow trails leading near."

"I rather like ghosts, and, as I bought the ranch from the lawyers in whose hands it at last fell, I shall go there."

"You bought it?"

"Yes, miss, for it went to two lawyers after the death of the last heir, and I gave a mere song for it, and was coming here soon to occupy it, when some renegade devils murdered an old friend of mine, and I struck their trail and here I am."

"But, good-by, Miss Hazel, and, should you need me, you know where to find me."

"But no cowboy will go near the Haunted Ranch."

"Yes, they will, if you send them," and again bidding the maiden good-by, Wild Bill mounted Eucher, and driving before him the horses he had appropriated from the captors of Hazel, he started for his new home, which had indeed a weird name in the neighborhood.

He had gone but a few miles when he met several horsemen, who eyed both him and the

horses suspiciously for a moment, and then one of them called out:

"I say, stranger, it looks suspicious for a man not known in these parts to be driving horses ahead of him, and they has a familiar look, too."

"Well, I will be known before long, if you interfere with me, and if you recognize those horses, you must be some of the same dirty gang that their riders belonged to."

Wild Bill had halted and instantly faced the three men on horseback, and his bold front, where they had the advantage of numbers, and implied threat of better acquaintance with him, at once disconcerted the party, and the one who had before spoken remarked:

"Waal, pard, we don't say as yer is dishonest, only that strangers with horses looks suspicious; but if we knowed who you were, then I guess it would be all right."

"I am not ashamed of my name, so will tell you that it is J. B. Hikok, and that men call me Wild Bill, the Pistol Dead Shot."

"Perhaps you have heard of me?"

The last was spoken in a dry tone, and Wild Bill enjoyed the effect of his name upon the horsemen, one of whom said, quickly:

"Oh, yes, we has heerd o' yer, Wild Bill, and we is glad to meet you, pard."

"It is more than I can say for my part regarding you; but I am Wild Bill, and I have bought the Haunted Ranch, and if any of you think those horses were stolen, why just come after them."

"Good-day," and the fearless man rode on after his horses, while his questioners seemed fully content with the explanation as to who he was.

CHAPTER XV.

THE HAUNTED RANCH.

CONTINUING on his way Wild Bill, soon after meeting the three horsemen, came in sight of the mountain spur in which was the Haunted Ranch.

From the way in which he struck the trail leading up the steep hillside, it was evident that he had been in the locality before.

Half way up the side of the hill, which almost rose to the prominence of a mountain, upon a level space an acre in size, was situated the cabin in which so many tragedies had been enacted.

It was a stoutly built log house, containing four rooms, and its two windows in front, and one on either side, commanded every approach to it, and the plateau on which it was situated, while behind it, rising over a hundred feet was a sheer cliff wall that was a shelter to the lonely cabin.

At one end of the plateau was a canyon, cutting through the cliff and extending back to a fertile valley half a mile from the house, where there was ample range for a thousand cattle, and which nature had walled in by impassable barriers upon all sides, rendering it a secure corral.

Into this canyon Wild Bill first turned his led horses, and having lariated Eucher out to feed near the cabin, he entered it, for the door was not locked.

A few wide pieces of furniture, such as tables, cots and chairs, a shelf with cooking utensils and a bear-skin in good preservation, were all the articles visible in the four rooms; but Wild Bill set to work at once, cleared up the place, and building a fire upon the hearth soon had things looking comfortable at least.

"Now to the village for some supplies, and I'll be at home to all callers, be they friends or foes," he muttered.

Catching one of the horses, as a pack animal to bring back his supplies, he mounted Eucher and set off for the village of Parker City, as it was called, though it rejoiced in but one tavern, several blacksmith shops, a dozen saloons, half as many stores, and a tavern known as the Ranchero's Exchange, which was not a bad appellation, as the ranchmen generally exchanged good money there for poor accommodations and poorer whisky.

Of course around these central resorts were grouped the shanty residences of the denizens of Parker City, who, it is needless to say, were generally a hard lot.

A busy place in the daytime, for Parker City supplied the wants of the settlers for fifty miles around, it was also a wild place, for here did congregate all idlers, as well as traders, rancheros, cowboys, a few scrub miners, and notorious characters to drink bad liquor, gam-

ble, or behave as they liked best, and the better classes of the community would allow.

Wild Bill had been in Parker City before, when scouting for the Government some years previous, and he knew well just the kind of place he was going to and that it was likely he would get into trouble with some of the rougher elements, after his rescue of Hazel Hart.

But this thought did not in the least disturb his equanimity, as he was one of those fearless natures that never shunned danger, never created a row, but once in stayed to the bitter end, and felt confident of rendering a good account of himself with whatever weapons he might be called upon to use.

CHAPTER XVI.

TAMING A BRUTE.

THE sun had not set when Wild Bill rode into Parker City, and putting his horses up at the Ranchero's Exchange, sought the best grocery in town.

From the moment of his arrival he was the cynosure of all eyes, and the town was exceedingly crowded, as rumors had gone about of the death of Major Hart and his son Horace, at the hands of the Vigilantes, and of the kidnapping of Hazel, and her rescue by some daring stranger.

There were some who wondered that Captain Don, of the Vigilantes, should do so high-handed an act as to kill two such respectable citizens as Major Hart and his son, when he was one who had been made chief of the Regulators to put down lawlessness in the community.

Who had kidnapped Hazel was not known, though it was whispered about that Captain Don had done this too.

Then scouts reported that Black Bear's village of Sioux, numbering over three hundred lodges, were encamped in the mountains, ostensibly to hunt, but it was feared to attack the settlements, and this caused great uneasiness, although the Indians were then in a kind of quasi peace with the whites.

The band of Dog Soldier Sioux, the outcasts and outlaws from the regular tribe, were known to be in the mountains somewhere, while a gang of horse-thieves were said to be hanging about, and things generally looked blue, and caused hot discussions upon all sides.

In this hour was it that Wild Bill entered the town, and his splendid form, handsome face, long, silken chestnut hair, and general make-up riveted every eye upon him.

To one and all he was known by reputation, as his deeds in Kansas and Missouri had spread over the whole border, and wild prairie-men looked upon him as a hero of heroes.

But it seemed that none in the different crowds knew him by sight, and on all sides came the questions:

"Who are he, pard?"

"Does yer know?"

"Hain't he some on ther han'some?"

"Does yer guess he'll back up his looks?"

"Is any o' yer goin' ter feel him fer luck?"

Wild Bill heard a number of these questions, and remarks of a like nature; but unheeding one and all quietly went to the grocery, and began his purchases, of blankets, provisions, an axe, pick and shovel, ammunition, and other articles he expected would be useful in his new home.

These he paid for in gold, and asked to have packed on a pack-saddle, ready for a horse he would bring for them when ready to start.

Seeing that his purchases did not break him financially, a huge loafer, leading a tremendous and savage-looking Russian bloodhound by a chain, came forward to get acquainted, and asked:

"Stranger, does yer want ter buy a dog?"

Wild Bill turned quickly upon him, and evidently expected the question was meant as an insult; but seeing the magnificent brute, he answered quietly:

"Yes, what will you take for him?"

"Heare tall."

"So I see."

"In price I mean."

"So I expect."

"He are fierce."

"So much the better."

"He are all kindness to his owner and ther devil let loose to a stranger."

"Do you own him?"

"Yes."

"I'll give you fifty dollars for him."

"Can't see it, pard."

"What do you ask then?"

"I'll gamble you for him."

"Against what?"

"Two hundred dollars."

"Done! when and where?"

"Right in pard Sloan's back room."

Sloan, the grocer, having just sold his new customer a large bill of goods, readily gave his consent, and the man and his dog, Wild Bill, and half a dozen lookers on that were in the store, adjourned to the back room and the game of cards was commenced, the dog being tied on one side, and the money placed on the table.

"Hold on, pard," suddenly cried Wild Bill, as he detected a covert act of his antagonist to play a card he had taken from his sleeve.

"What are it, stranger?"

"Simply, that if you attempt to cheat me again I'll inherit the dog through your death," was the reply in a cool tone.

"You don't dare—"

"Shut up and play the game out, and then if you consider yourself insulted resent it," interrupted Wild Bill, and he arose above par in the estimation of the lookers on by his quiet manner.

The cowboy, for such he was when he had work to do, scowled, muttered a few unintelligible words, and the game continued and Wild Bill won the bloodhound.

Raking the money back toward him, Wild Bill turned and approached the savage brute, just as the cowboy cried:

"I'm durned ef you didn't cheat me, stranger, and you'll not get the dog."

"I will."

"Nary; at him, Tiger."

The dog growled fiercely, but Wild Bill did not hesitate, but fastening his piercing eyes upon him, and with a stern command for him to lie down, advanced upon the savage brute, while the crowd looked on with awe and amazement.

"At him, Tiger! at him!" cried the cowboy.

Again the dog growled fiercely and reared up, pulling hard against his chain, which was fastened to a staple in one of the logs of the cabin.

With a bound Wild Bill was upon him, his hand clutching his throat, and then he gave him some stunning blows upon either side of his head with his open palm, while the crowd was wild with excitement.

Thoroughly cowing the dog, by his immense strength and utter fearlessness of him, he hurled him from him into the corner, just as the cowboy, armed with a knife, rushed upon him, shouting:

"Cuss yer, yer sha'n't steal my dog from me."

They were the last words he uttered, as turning quickly Wild Bill's revolver went to a level, and with the report the Cowboy dropped.

"Mr. Sloan, give me something for my dog to eat," said Wild Bill quietly, wholly ignoring the man he had killed.

"Certainly, sir, certainly; here is a nice piece of antelope meat a hunter left for me," cried the grocer, and again walking up to the brute Wild Bill gave him the tempting repast, and stood by while he ate it.

Then he released the brute from his chain, and called to him to follow.

Instantly the animal obeyed, and went crouching at his feet.

"Mr. Sloan, please have that poor fool buried at my expense," and tossing a few gold pieces upon the counter, as he motioned to the dead body of the cowboy, Wild Bill left the grocer, closely followed by the huge brute, now thoroughly tamed, and obedient to his new master.

CHAPTER XVII.

GETTING ACQUAINTED IN POKER CITY.

THE reader may surmise that the successful taming of the bloodhound and the killing of the cowboy, who attacked him in Sloan's grocery, spread rapidly around Poker City, and when Wild Bill appeared, the dog at his heels, going over toward the Ranchero's Exchange, he was more curiously regarded than ever.

As the sun had set, and the supper hour was near at hand, the tavern tap-room was crowded with the patrons of the place, and many others who just dropped in to see what was going on.

"I can get supper here, I suppose, sir?" queried Wild Bill, politely addressing the host

of the Exchange, a tall, cruel-faced man in his shirt-sleeves, and with a pipe in his mouth.

"If you pays for it you can; but we don't board dogs," was the rude answer.

"I always pay for what I get, and my dog has had his supper," said Bill, without the slightest show of anger, a circumstance which made Bouncer Brooks, the tavern-keeper, think the stranger had heard of him as a dangerous character, and dreaded him.

Bill took out the price of his supper and handed it to the man and started for the supper room, for the bell just then was ringing to announce that the meal was ready.

"Hold on, pard, I doesn't admit dogs in my dinin' room," yelled the host, and his loud voice attracted the attention of all, who instantly stopped and gazed at the stranger, who also came to a halt and turned.

"Which of 'em does yer call ther dog, Bouncer?" asked an ungainly fellow standing near, and whose great size made him a terror in the town, for he was known to possess wonderful strength.

Instantly Wild Bill was confronting him, his iron gripe at his throat, and his right fist ready for work, while he hissed forth:

"Did you mean that as an insult to me?"

"What if I did?" was the retort of the bully, who felt conscious of his power when he chose to exert it.

"Then you shall beg my pardon for the insult," was the cool reply.

"I gusses yer doesn't know me, stranger," he said, to the surprise of all keeping remarkably calm.

"No, and your friends won't when I have done with you, if you don't apologize."

"It hain't in me, pard," and as the bully spoke he attempted to suddenly hurl Wild Bill from him.

But the slender hand, like a steel claw, grasped his throat with a strength that almost made the bones crack, and the firm fist rained blow after blow with lightning rapidity upon the brutal face, while, with a dextrous movement of his foot, Wild Bill kicked the feet of the man from under him, and as he struck the floor with terrific force, he placed a revolver to his head, and said, with astonishing calmness:

"You have just fifteen seconds to live, unless you ask my pardou."

All present had been astounded at the easy manner, apparently, with which Wild Bill had handled the giant bully, and none more so than himself, for he had not been able to get in a blow or draw a weapon, and with his throat paining him, his face cut and swelling from the blows of the sharp knuckles, and the muzzle of a revolver pressed into one eye, he sung out lustily:

"I apologizes, pard, fer all I'm worth, durned ef I don't, an' I says here's my flipper fer yer friend, as I'm proud ter call any man as kin handle me."

Wild Bill instantly resumed his revolver, and stepping back was about to go on, not noticing the bully's hand; but, as if thinking better of it, he held forth his own, raised him to his feet, and said:

"All right, stick to your words, and I'll be your friend."

"I'll do it; come, liquor up with me; come, boys, it's my treat, fer I hav met a better man than I is."

All followed Boss Bricktop—as he was called, first on account of being "the boss" of the town as far as strength went, and having hair as red as a brick—into the bar-room, and those who had noticed Bouncer Brooks's evident desire for trouble with the stranger, now saw that he was willing to say no more, and Bill and his dog went together in to supper, the latter, at his new master's command, getting up in a chair by his side and calmly sitting there.

"The stranger are layin' fer Bouncer Brooks," whispered one person at the table to another.

"Yas, he is jist weepin' fer to hav ther Bouncer come in and order that dog out."

"But ther Bouncer won't do it," put in a third.

"He hain't seen him yet."

"Thar he comes now; boys, is we in range?

The tavern-keeper now came into the room, and walked down one side of the long table and up the other, and it was evident that he saw the bloodhound's conspicuous seat; but he also saw lying on the plate in front of him a Colt's revolver, and passed on without a word, and out into his office again.

Having finished his supper, and fed the

bloodhound some choice pieces of meat, Wild Bill walked out into the bar, and up to the desk, behind which stood the host.

"My dog had supper too, so I wish to pay for him."

"Five dollars," was the reply.

Wild Bill instantly laid the money in the host's hand, who, failing to get up a row on his exorbitant charge, said gruffly:

"Yer'd better register, ef yer kin write, so as I kin see who are my high-toned dog an' his pard."

The large crowd waited breathlessly, for they saw that Bouncer Brooks was in for trouble, and knew that as he stood behind his desk, a revolver was in his hand.

Wild Bill took the pen without a word, and wrote his name in a bold hand; but instead of writing the word *Pistol*, he sketched skillfully a pistol and wrote after it the words "Dead Shot."

Next followed the registering of his dog's name, for he instantly got a name for him, and when he threw down the pen the host glanced at the book and saw:

"Wild Bill, Pistol Dead Shot, Kansas.
Grip, Russia."

"What! is you ther Kansas terror I heerd so much about as a killer, an' is that a terrier?" said the host.

"I am from Kansas, and it has been my misfortune to have to kill a few of just such wretches as you are, for meddling with me and my affairs," was Bill's cool reply.

"Waal, yer is in ther wrong place ter put on frills, pard, as—"

"Hold! drop that pistol!"

The ringing words of Wild Bill interrupting the words of the landlord, turned every eye upon him, and they saw that, quick as was Bouncer Brooks on the draw and shoot, the keen eye of the stranger had detected his intention to raise his weapon from behind the desk, and with marvelous rapidity he had covered him with his own revolver.

Bouncer Brooks turned deadly pale, for he saw that he had been beaten at his own game, and there was that in the look of the man before him which told him he was not to be trifled with.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE VIGILANTE CAPTAIN.

"Did you hear, sir?"

As Wild Bill spoke, his revolver covering the head of the landlord, his finger seemed to press nervously against the trigger, and Bouncer Brooks loved life too well to hesitate where there was not a chance in his favor, and let fall the pistol.

"Now, sir, let me say that I have become a settler in this part of the country, expect to come often to Poker City, and shall always visit your hotel; so, if you have cause of quarrel with me, you will have ample opportunity to settle it."

"If, on the other hand you care to visit me, you will find me at the Haunted Ranch, which I have purchased, intending to go into the cattle business."

Replacing his weapon in his belt, amid the murmur of astonishment his words created, Wild Bill started to leave the tavern, the faithful Grip at his heels, when Boss Bricktop, who had been a delighted observer of the discomfiture of Bouncer Brooks, called out:

"Pard, does yer mean it, that yer hangs out in the Haunted Ranch?"

"I do."

"It are full o' speerits, an' thar is a score o' dead men planted near ther cabin."

"I have always found dead men good neighbors, and, as for the spirits, I like them, and beg all of you to join me in running them down now," and Bill led the way to the bar-room, the sure road to the hearts of many present and the ringing of the supper bell had not created so unanimous a movement as his invitation caused.

But though they crowded in close they yet gave Grip plenty of room, as several times he had given vent to a low, vicious growl of admonition.

"Set 'em up, barkeeper, for the party."

"Landlord, will you join us?" and Bill turned to Bouncer Brooks, who had not yet recovered from his surprise at being so cleverly mastered in his own house.

"I'll not take a shingle off my own roof, ef I does hav ter drink with a man I don't like. Brandy, Dave," growled Bouncer Brooks.

"I ask no man's liking, and court no man's

dislike," was Bill's haughty response, and all being served with drinks, he continued pleasantly:

"Your very good health, gentlemen."

He had just paid the score, and received back his change from the barkeeper, when in came a party of three or four men, having evidently just dismounted.

"The Vigilante captain," cried a score of voices, while the landlord said:

"Glad to see you back again, Captain Don; any fresh news?"

The one he addressed was the same man whom Wild Bill had just beheld at the duel scene on the creek bank, where he had shot down Horace Hart and wounded the major; the same man with whom he had exchanged shots, and whose steel shirt had protected him from instant death.

The Vigilante captain glanced over the crowd, nodding pleasantly here and there, and answered, as he stepped to the bar, not having apparently caught sight of Wild Bill:

"Yes, Brooks, there is news, for that fellow, whoever he be, that looks so like me, has been up to some devilish tricks, for he has shot young Horace Hart in a duel, hung the old major, and kidnapped his lovely daughter Hazel."

"Yes, we heard thar had been ther devil ter pay and no pitch hot, over at ther Hart ranch, but we thought thet you hed did ther work an' know'd yer biz as why yer hed ter," answered the landlord.

"No, I have been off with these boys on a scout, and coming back by the Hart ranch, learned what had taken place, and that it was all laid at my door."

"I tell you, gentlemen, it made me mad, for I have sins enough of my own to answer for, without this counterpart of mine dashing through the country, committing the very acts of lawlessness that I am endeavoring to put down as a Vigilante, and I have registered an oath to run him to eover and hang him."

"Pardon me, sir, but do I address Captain Don, Dare Devil Don, or Dagger Don, as people call you?" and Wild Bill stepped before the Vigilante captain.

"You do, sir; whom have I the honor of meeting?" and the Vigilante looked unflinchingly into the face of Wild Bill, without the slightest sign of ever having met him before.

"Do you ask that question, sir, when it has been so short a time since we met, under circumstances to cause you to remember me well?" sternly said Wild Bill.

"Upon my word, sir, we never met before; if so, I fail to recall when and where."

"I shall remind you, sir, by accusing you of being the one who killed Horace Hart in a duel, kidnapped his sister, and hung his father, and saved your cowardly life in your duel with me by the steel woven shirt you wear."

All were astounded at this bold charge, and Bouncer Brooks muttered to Boss Bricktop:

"That game rooster with ther dog has got his match now, fer even I gives in to the Vigilante cap'n."

"I hain't so durned sartin o' thet," responded Boss Bricktop, who, having been well-thrashed by Wild Bill, had adopted him as his hero.

All were now as still as death, awaiting the Vigilante's reply to the bold words of the stranger.

And, in an off-hand, smiling manner, it came:

"My dear sir, did I not know that you had mistaken some one else for me, I would be compelled to resent your words in a very summary way; but as you appear to be a stranger here, I will explain to you that I am Captain Don, the chief of the Vigilantes, that I am a ranchero, am known all around Parker City for half a hundred miles, and have lately been so unfortunate as to find that I have a double, who has been committing sins that, by those who do not know me well, are laid at my door."

"As for Major Hart, I knew him well, liked him and his son, and loved his sweet daughter, but when she saw fit to give me the mitten, I neither wept nor was heart-broken, but will be her cavalier to-day did she call me to her side, or need my aid."

Wild Bill was staggered, for the man's words and manner seemed to bear the impress of truth; but he said calmly:

"One question, sir, and if you do not like my doubting you, of course you have but to resent it."

"A dozen if you wish, as soon as you have informed me who my questioner is."

"It are Wild Bill, ther Pistol Dead Shot o' Kansas, an' thet critter ahind him be his dog, Grip from Rushy, fer so he hes writ hisself an' thet canine down on my register," cried Bouncer Brooks.

"Yas, an' he hes left his mark on my physiognomy, an' backed her Bouncer clean down in his own den, while he captered thet animile with a throat squeeze an' kilt his t'other boss; he did fer a fact, or I w'u'd lie fer cold wittles," put in Bricktop, whose face had not improved by swelling.

"Indeed! I am glad to meet the famous Wild Bill, of whom I have heard so much. My hand, sir," said the Vigilante captain, pleasantly.

"One question, sir, ere I give you my hand."

"I am waiting, sir."

"Do you wear a shirt of woven steel."

"I am no coward, sir!" was the angry reply.

"The man who resembles you so much, and who certainly is your double in looks, voice and manner, is a coward, then, for he does wear a steel shirt to protect his coward heart."

"Pardon me," and as Wild Bill spoke he placed his hand upon the shoulder of the Vigilante, then at his side, and carefully felt for what he had seemed to feel confident he would find.

Captain Don bore the search with remarkable good-humor, and said with a smile:

"Well, Sir Dead Shot?"

"I am mystified, I admit, and accept your hand; but if I find there is deception practiced, it will end in a death-grip, I warn you."

The Vigilante captain laughed lightly, and responded:

"My dear pard, hundreds of men can swear an *alibi* for me as regards this double of mine and myself being one and the same."

"Come; a glass with us to welcome you to Parker City."

Wild Bill drank the toast offered him, and then turned on his heel and left the Ranchero's Exchange, followed by Grip.

As he passed Boss Bricktop, he motioned to that worthy to follow him, a hint the man was not slow in taking.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN ALLY.

AFTER leaving the Ranchero's Exchange, Wild Bill went toward the stable where he had left his horses, but seeing that he was followed, he halted in an unfrequented place, and Bricktop came up, saying quietly as he stopped:

"Did I mistook, pard, in thinkin' thet yer tipped me ther wink when yer comed out?"

"No; I wanted to have you follow me."

"Then I were right, an' it were not ther jerkin' o' my muscles, which you knocked eend-way—oh, Lordy! Pard, but yer hev got iron fists fer a fact."

"I've got more precious metal in them, Boss, which you can have if you say it's friendship between us, and will serve me."

"I'll do it, pard, fer I owned up I was licked, an' I don't owe you no grudge, fer yer did it han'some, an' I'm yer friend."

"Serve me well, and I will pay you in gold; be treacherous, and I frankly tell you I will pay you in steel."

"I prefer the former, pard."

"Now, what are you doing?"

"Tryin' ter make a honest livin'."

"Doing what?"

"Loafin' round, drivin' cattle when I kin, hangin' up the Exchange fer drinks an' a squar' meal when I kin, an'—an'—"

"And now and then picking up a stray horse or doing a job that pays?"

"Fact! You has me down fine."

"Well, have you a horse?"

"I has a fine saddle and bridle."

"Ah! Then all you need is the horse?"

"Thet are all, pard."

"You have pistols and a knife, I see."

"It are onhealthy ter go 'ithout 'em in these parts."

"True. Well, here a couple of hundred dollars for you, and I want you to buy a good horse, fix yourself up, quit gambling and drinking hard, and work for me."

"Lordy gracious! I guess I'd better jine ther church at once, I'll be so good."

"You'll get preaching enough from me if you don't do right, Boss; but I shall trust you."

"You kin do it, fer you is clean white. Now, what's to be did?"

"You know this Vigilante captain?"

"The Don?"

"Yes."

"I does."

"Do you like him?"

"As ther devil do Holy Water."

"How has he wronged you?"

"Waal, I hed a leetle ranch once, me an' a pard, an' thet pard were true as steel."

"But he gambled a leetle, and ther Dagger Don won his pile, an' I put in mine fer him ter try an' get it back; but it all went the same way, and that made a loafer an' a vagabond out o' me, fer Duffy, my pard, got mad with drink, drew on the cap'n an' got shot down, an' I buried him up ther canyon yonder."

"All right then, for I'll win your losses back for you some time."

"What! does yer handle pasteboard well enough ter play ther Don?"

"I'll risk it with him some time."

"Now what is your name?"

"Boss Bricktop."

"I do not mean the name you are dodging justice under, but your real name?"

"Pard, once upon a time I forgot that name so far, I wrote another that wasn't mine to a check, an' I served my time for it, an' then came out here whar I didn't need a handle to put on with baptism ter make it legal."

"Jist call me Boss, an ef yer like ter vary it a leetle sing out Bricktop, an' I'll be thar."

"All right, Boss, I guess we'll work in the harness together."

"Now I want you to strike the trail of Dagger Don, watch his every action, who he talks with, and where he goes, and each week come to the Haunted Ranch and report to me."

"Yer won't be thar in a week."

"Why not?"

"Ther spirits will—"

"Hang the spirits! I'll be there, never fear, so come and report to me; but mind you do not let the Don know you are working up his case."

"Nary; I are as cunnin' as a fox."

"I feel I can trust you; now look up a good horse to-morrow and rig yourself out and begin work."

"I'll do it, pard, thanks to you; but you must keep your eyes open, fer yer hev got acquainted in Poker City now, and thar be fellers here as w'u'd like to call in yer chips."

"I'll be at home when they call, never fear," and Wild Bill went on to the stable, got his horses, packed his purchases on the led animal, and started out to his Haunted Ranch.

CHAPTER XX.

A WARNING.

SOME seven miles had he gone on his way in the darkness, and had come to a trail, which he knew branched off to the Hart ranch, a league distant, when, as he continued on toward the mountains, he heard the thud of hoofs, falling rapidly upon the prairie.

Instantly he was on his guard, but noticing that there was but one horse, he rode on with almost indifference, so great was his confidence in himself to overcome any ordinary danger.

Soon the horseman came in sight in the darkness, and seeing him drew rein, and seemed to be cautiously scanning him.

Wild Bill merely kept his eyes upon the stranger, and rode on, when the horseman came on after him until within easy distance and called out:

"Wild Bill!"

Bill fairly started at the sound of the voice, and answered:

"Yes, I am Wild Bill."

Turning his steed he rode back toward the stranger, who also advanced toward him until the heads of the two horses were together.

"Miss Hazel!"

"Yes, I am Hazel Hart, and I was seeking you," said the maiden hurriedly.

"Well, how can I serve you, for it must be something important to bring you out alone on the prairie at midnight, after the dangers you have just passed through?"

"It is important, sir, for I have come to save your life."

"Save my life, Miss Hazel?" asked Bill in surprise.

"Yes, and I owe it to you after all you have done for me."

"Three men came to the ranch two hours ago for supper, and I overheard, from my seat on the back porch, what they said."

"And what did they say, Miss Hazel?" asked Wild Bill.

"That one of their number had seen you buy a quantity of goods at Sloan's grocery in Poker City, and saw that you had plenty of money."

"These things you had told Sloan that you would call for by nine o'clock with your pack-horse, to take to your ranch, and this man had formed the plan to waylay you, kill and rob you, and had asked the other two to join him."

"I thank you, Miss Hazel, for this warning," said Bill softly.

"As soon as they left I mounted my horse and came to head you off, and now you can go another trail to the ranch, if you will not come by and remain at our ranch all night."

"Thank you, no; I must go on."

"Then strike the trail half a mile below here heading to the right, and you will avoid Dead Man's Creek where they are to wait for you."

"Ah! there is where they are to lie in wait for me is it?"

"Well, I must be off, after again thanking you."

"I hope all is going well at the ranch?"

"Yes; will you not stop some time and have a meal, when you are in the neighborhood?"

"Thank you, yes, and very soon, for there is something I wish to see you about; nay, I will ride within sight of the ranch with you now, for you must not go alone, and you can tell me what I would know."

Hazel protested she was not afraid; but Wild Bill persisted that the prairie at night was no place for a girl alone, and rode by her side in the direction of the ranch, while he asked:

"Are you sure, Miss Hazel, that it was the Vigilante captain who kidnapped you?"

"I am."

"You know him well?"

"Yes."

"There can be no mistake?"

"None, for he is not a man of ordinary appearance by any means."

"True."

"Did he speak of a motive?"

"He was revengeful, I frankly tell you, because I refused his love."

"And sought to force you to marry him?"

"No, for he hated me, never loved me, I am confident, and I believe intended, as you hinted, to sell me to the Indians, or that white renegade."

"There is, it is said, a man his very double, in face, form and voice, and who rides the same kind of horse as Dagger Don, who is going about the country committing deeds of violence and outlawry."

"Do you believe this?"

"There are many to swear to an *alibi* for the Don."

"I cannot believe there are two men so alike."

"Perhaps some enemy of his may be playing this game to get him the credit of his act, and have him hanged for it?"

"It may be, sir: but I would have to see both men together to believe it."

"So think I, and yet when I met Dagger Don to-night, he feigned never having seen me before, and even had no steel woven shirt on, for I searched him. I confess I was staggered, so that I am mystified."

"Well, I will help you to solve the mystery, and I believe that I can; but there is the ranch, so do not come out of your way further, unless you will remain all night."

"No, I must go on; good-night."

Away bounded the maiden's horse, and Wild Bill turned and rode back on the trail he had come, his head bent in deep thought, though his ears were on the alert for any sound.

Before him trotted the pack-horse, and behind him came Grip the bloodhound, who kept close to Eucher's heels.

Presently Wild Bill drew rein and dismounting, said simply:

"A lucky thought and I'll carry it out."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE AMBUSH.

In a secluded part of a western bound trail stood three men, talking in suppressed, yet eager tones.

They stood just in the edge of a clump of willows, jutting out from the edge of a prairie stream, around which the trail ran.

Back in the dehser and larger timber were

their horses, hitched securely, and muzzled, to prevent their neighing, should another animal come near.

The men had evidently come there for some sinister purpose, for their movements were stealthy, and they kept a close look-out over the dark prairie, as though watching for the coming of some one.

"You is sure he were ter come this trail, Bitters?" asked one, of an individual whom the reader would have recognized, had it been light enough, as one of the supporters of Dagger Don in the duel scene.

"Yas, fer he told Sloan he were coming home ter-night, and this are ther trail, unless he wanted ter ride round ther head o' ther divide, jist ter be a-movin' on," answered Bitters.

"And he's got ther dust?"

"He hev."

"Enough ter make ther risk suthin' worth, fer they do say he are a terrer!"

"He are a terrer turned loose ter feed, as I knows; but what kin he do ag'in' a shot as plumps him right over?"

"That are so; and you fires that shot?"

"I does."

"It were good 'o' you not ter take all fer yerself, but ter invite me an' Jerry heur!"

"Yas, I were born kind; but ther kindness are ter myself in a leetle way, as, in case I missed him yer'd come in handy, an' it are better ter share a leetle pull then not to git gold, but lead all fer one's se'l."

"That's so; but yer doesn't miss, Bitters."

"Not often, I'll sw'ar; but guns does hang fire sometimes, an' it would be unhealthy fer me if it did with that chap."

"Yas, he might take Bitters in his'n," put in Jerry dryly.

"Waal, he hev ther dust, an' he bes a diamint on ther leetle finger as sparkles beautiful, an' he hev over two hundred dollars in stores an' sich, an' two horses, not ter speak o' his weapons, an' any other leetle things he may hev about his clothes."

"Knowin' these things, I jist got you gerloots ter come an' help me git 'em."

"An' we is heur."

"Ya."

"Waal, you is ter take him with yer rifle jist as he gits near!"

"Yas, an' you is ter jump fer his horse, an' Jerry fer ther pack horse, an' then ther thing is did, an' by daylight we'll be back in Poker City as innercent as lambs."

"He, hel an' we must stay innercent or ther Vigilantes will string us."

"Nary, when we is Vigilantes ourselves—hark!"

All was now attention, and the three ambushed villains listened attentively and distinctly heard the sound of hoof-falls upon the prairie.

"He are comin'," whispered Bitters.

"He are fer a fact," said Jerry.

"Ther Lord help us ter do it prime," fervently put in Bible Ben, who having been an itinerant parson in his youth, could not drop the habit of asking Divine assistance even in his acts of deviltry.

"He are coming in a walk, which are good fer my aim," whispered Bitters.

"Ther pack-horse are ahead."

"Yas, let him go by, fer we can catch him easy."

"He will come within a few yards o' yer, so as you can hit him prime."

"I knows whar a man's heart hangs out, pard," was the significant replied of Bitters, as he cocked his rifle, rested the barrel on the limb of a willow, and crouched down ready for the fatal shot.

There had now come near the ambushed villains the iron-gray pack-horse of Wild Bill, going at a steady walk, and evidently heavily loaded.

Behind him some thirty paces came the proud stepping Eucher, his rider upright in the saddle, and seemingly indifferent to the warning of danger given him by Hazel, although he well knew that he was in the very locality she had heard his toes select as the best place for the perpetration of the red deed.

Past the crouching forms went the pack-horse, and Eucher was within ten feet of the thicket, when the finger of Bitters touched the trigger; the flash and report followed; and the noble horse shied violently, while to the ground, with a heavy crash fell the rider.

A yell burst from the lips of the three men; but it was a yell of terror, for suddenly the

pack-horse wheeled to the right-about, and what was supposed to be the pack, arose upright in the saddle and became a man's form, while a pistol-shot rang out, and Bible Ben bit the dust and Jerry was sprung upon and seized by the throat by the faithful Grip.

Yet, ere another shot came from the unerring revolver, Bitters, seeing his fearful danger, fired hastily and down dropped the horse upon which Wild Bill was riding, pinning him beneath him.

The first thought of Bitters was to rush forward and fire upon the fallen man; but he was not one to take any chances, if he could avoid it, and like the very wind he sprung through the thicket, mounted the nearest horse and rode for his life up the creek.

It was no easy task for Wild Bill to at once divest himself of the dead horse upon his leg; but he succeeded in doing so, after a while, and hastened toward the savagely growling bloodhound, who had dragged his victim to the earth, and still held his sharp teeth in his throat.

"Noble dog, you have done your work well, for he is dead as the wretch through whose brain I sent a bullet," and Wild Bill patted the dog affectionately, and bade him let go his hold.

Grip at once obeyed, and wagged his tail in thanks for his master's praise, while he walked over to examine Bible Ben, to see if the pistol bullet had proven as sure death as his teeth.

Eucher had run off a short distance after the shot; but now, at his master's call, came back with a neigh of pleasure, and Wild Bill picked up the dummy which had been his rider, and which consisted of his purchases tied up in blankets and wearing his coat and hat, a most ingenious mock-man, which had cleverly deceived the ambuscaders.

Bill quietly laughed at the success of his device, restored his purchases to the pack-saddle, and started off in hunt of the horses of the dead men, for he correctly surmised that, as he had heard but one horse gallop off, and there were three men, there must be two more animals near by.

Grip aided him greatly here, and led him directly to the two animals, and upon the back of one the pack-saddle and its contents were soon strapped, and, mounting, Wild Bill rode on, muttering:

"I got a hole through a sack of flour and a tin pan, but I made a good horse by that arrangement, and found out that Grip is worth his weight in gold."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A GHASTLY VISITANT.

WITHOUT further adventure Wild Bill reached his ranch, deposited his pack-saddle upon the floor, turned the two horses of the ambuscaders out into the valley, and lariated Eucher out to feed near by.

Then he sought rest, Grip taking up his watch near the door.

The sun was high in the heavens when he awoke, for he had been very much fatigued and slept soundly, conscious that Grip would arouse him if danger came near.

Having prepared his breakfast, he set about putting his house in order, fastened a lock on his door, and soon had all comfortable about him, after which he mounted Eucher and rode away to the nearest ranch to purchase his first lot of cattle.

It was noon of the next day when he returned, driving before him half a hundred head of fine cattle he had bought from a ranchero over on the river.

Driving them through the canyon into the valley, he started for his cabin, feeling that he had made his first start as a ranchero, and thoroughly satisfied with his purchase of the Haunted Ranch.

His half dozen horses which he had gained through the death of their riders, were in the valley corral, and apparently enjoying their change of ownership, which gave them a rest and such a rich pasturage, and Wild Bill felt that he was not to be troubled with many visitors and rejoiced in the fact.

But suddenly, as he approached the cabin, his eyes fell upon a white spot upon the door.

It had not been there when he left, and as he drew nearer he saw that it was held there with a dagger, and was a piece of paper.

Drawing out the dagger, a small one with ivory handle, he read on the paper, written in red ink, and in a bold hand:

"To Wild Bill, the Pistol Dead Shot of Kansas:

"You have the audacity to come to this tragic spot to live, unmindful of the fate of all who have dwelt here before.

"But take warning, and seek a home elsewhere, or your fate will be the fate of those who lie buried near."

"Your heart, Wild Bill, is not harder to reach than the heart of other men; your life hangs by the same slender thread that suspends the lives of all human beings, and I warn you that if you persist in remaining here you will become another victim of the mystery hanging over the

"HAUNTED RANCH."

Twice Wild Bill read this strange communication over, and then, in his reckless way muttered:

"Well, here I stay, for we wasn't born in the woods to be scared by the hoot of owls; were we, Grip?"

The bloodhound wagged his tail in reply, and gazed around him with apparent admiration of the new home and its surrounding, while he licked his chops with an air of relish at having to tackle a foe soon.

Taking his huge key from his belt, Wild Bill unlocked the heavy, nail-studded door and entered the cabin.

His first glance fell upon his cot, which he had neatly made before leaving, and he started at beholding the blankets raised, as though a form lay beneath them.

Drawing his revolver he advanced, determined to give the occupant a rude awakening, and threw down the blankets.

But even his stern lips parted with a cry at what he beheld there.

It was a skeleton form, the skull resting upon the pillow and grinning up into his face that horrible grin of death, which in mockery it would seem, rests upon the bony visage of the human being after life has gone and the flesh has left it.

The bony hands were clasped over the white, shining ribs that had formed the breast, and riveted together firmly, the skeleton form lay at ease in the bed.

"Holy Rockies!"

Such were the words that arose to the lips of Wild Bill, after his first exclamation of surprise.

Then he continued:

"Well, I don't have to kill men enough, but must entertain cut and dried skeletons to boot."

"Now, where in the name of Satan did you come from?"

"Don't know."

"Well, I do," and raising the hideous form in his arms he carried it out of the cabin and bung it upon a peg near the door.

"I guess, as you won't stay in your grave you'll like it up there," he muttered.

Then re-entering his cabin he searched it thoroughly for the discovery of how any one could have entered during his absence.

But the windows were closed and bolted as he had left them, the door certainly had not been unlocked, for the lock he had purchased was an immense one and had a patent key, which he had had with him on his belt.

The flooring was rock, and the chimney was too small at the top to admit of any one entering.

"I'll give it up this time; but some of these fine nights for ghosts I'll tackle one, and we'll worry it, won't we Grip?"

But Grip looked as though he would prefer to worry something with more meat upon it than a skeleton form.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A GHOST ON ITS ROUNDS.

If the ones who had so mysteriously visited the Haunted Ranch in the absence of its new owner, and placed there the skeleton, had intended to frighten Wild Bill with the supernatural, as well as with the warning stuck on his door, they certainly failed, for he was too well used to death scenes to fear the dead, and had made too many graves in the land to shun them.

As for the warning, he felt fully capable of taking care of himself, and retired that night without the slightest dread of any event that might occur.

As the night was pleasant, he left the door open, and Grip therefore had the privilege of going in and out at will, and after several efforts to find the best place to lie down, decided on the outside of the cabin as the most fitting for a guard-dog.

His master had been asleep several hours when he was awakened by a long-drawn howl from the dog.

"Well, Grip," he said, as it was repeated, "that is dismal music; and I don't care for such a serenade, and if you are howling for your old master, I'll get jealous."

But when the bloodhound repeated the howl for the third time, Wild Bill concluded to get up and reconnoiter, for not knowing the nature of the animal thoroughly, he thought it might be the best way he knew to give an alarm of danger.

"If that's your note of alarming one, according to the Russian code, Grip, it's a long way off from the right way, for that unearthly howl of yours has set every wolf on the same tone, started all the coyotes to yelping, and made the owls join in the chorus."

"But we'll see what's up," and Bill, rifle in hand, was about to step to the door, when with a sharp yelp, like one caused by fear, Grip came tearing into the cabin.

"Ah, you cowardly brute, to run that way," and Wild Bill stepped fearlessly to the door and looked out.

The night was dark, but star-light, and as his keen eyes narrowly searched the space in front of the cabin for the cause of the dog's alarm, he suddenly beheld coming toward the cabin, from the pine thicket beyond, and in which were the graves of the murdered tenants of the ranch, a form clad in snowy white.

"The devil!"

The impious name of his Satanic Majesty sprung involuntarily to the lips of the man as his eyes fell upon the robed form.

He saw it glide, rather than walk along, and from its head downward seemed to fall a greenish light that yet shone nowhere else.

"It's a ghost on the rampage, or I am a liar," he muttered, more impressed than he cared to admit even to himself.

"No wonder Grip howled so dismally and stuck his tail in between his legs and hunted the cabin, for yonder what-is-it does look scary."

"As old California Joe says, 'I isn't afeerd, an' I hain't alarmed, nor be I skeert, yet I don't like the varmint.'"

Slowly the ghost, as it certainly appeared to be an object not of the earth earthly, came gliding on, and Wild Bill boldly stepped out of the door and waited, his rifle ready across his arm.

"Now why the devil can't be, she or it lay low in its grave, without prowling round that way, scaring bloodhounds and—well, surprising I'll call it—yes, surprising honest folks."

"If it did not look so like a woman I'd give it a chance to die again, if a bullet would effect it, but I never yet turned a muzzle at a petticoat, and I won't do it now."

The strange, certainly weird apparition was not twenty paces away, and moved on toward the canyon, swerving a little from its former course to the cabin.

Passing the door, it continued on to the canyon, and instantly Wild Bill started to follow it.

As he did so the pace of the apparition quickened its speed; as he went faster, it increased its speed.

"I'll give it a chase for I'm speedy on foot," he muttered, and away he fled in pursuit.

But the ghostly form glided more swiftly than he did over the uneven ground; and turning into the canyon he lost sight of it.

"Grip! ho, Grip!" he called, and the bloodhound came bounding to his side.

But his every effort failed to make him strike the scent of the mysterious being.

"Well, it must be a good ghost, or you'd soon catch the smell of brimstone about it, Grip."

"Anyhow, we'll give it up, as it don't seem to be dangerous, and it may go to the valley and ride the tails off the horses there for all I care."

"Come, Grip, we'll go back and finish our nap, and some of these fine nights I'll get my clutches on that ghost and hold on if it sails off to Heaven with me."

So saying Wild Bill retraced his way to his cabin, and again throwing himself upon his cot was soon fast asleep, Grip having chosen the inside of the house this time as preferable to the exterior where ghosts disturbed his slumbers.

CHAPTER XXV.

BOSS BRICKTOP PUTS IN AN APPEARANCE.

The night in the Haunted Ranch passed away without a second visit from the ghostly visitor, and Wild Bill looked carefully over

the ground, when he arose the following morning for some sign of a trail; but none appeared, and for the first time in his life he was beginning to believe that the spirits of the dead were permitted to return to the earth.

As for Grip he looked ashamed of himself, and drooped his head, and tail too, when his master read him a lecture upon being afraid of ghosts.

"You may not be able to get your teeth into the seat of his pants, Grip, if it's a gentleman ghost, but for that very reason you should feel that he is less able to do you harm."

"If it was a lady ghost, you did right to hunt your den; but we will see yet what it amounts to," and Wild Bill continued to chat with his dog while he prepared breakfast, treating the brute with more cordiality than he did human beings, as he was, when with others, always taciturn.

A visit to the valley corral showed him that the horses had not been ridden either by witch or ghost, and Wild Bill, with no intention of being driven from his new home, set to work to get everything into comfortable shape for life there.

The next night Grip came into the cabin snarling and whining, and arising to discover the cause, Wild Bill beheld the same ghostly visitant, bound upon the same trail as before.

"Make yourself at home, pard, and don't mind me," he called out, as he returned to his cot.

No trail could be found the following morning, and Wild Bill had just come from the valley, where he had been looking after his cattle, when he saw a horseman seated on his horse, which had halted, and leisurely gazing up at the cabin.

He was some distance away on the prairie; but Bill recognized Boss Bricktop, and beckoned to him to come on.

Instantly the horseman obeyed, and in fifteen minutes after dismounted in front of the cabin.

Wild Bill saw that he was well mounted, better dressed, and armed, and looked in every way improved from what he had at their first meeting.

"I were a-lookin' fer yer, pard, when yer seen me," said Bricktop.

"Why did you not come right on to the cabin?"

Boss glanced furtively around him, and said:

"Nary, fer I hain't ther boy ter tackle ghosts."

"It's broad daylight, man."

"Waal it may be, an' yet I is afeerd o' speerits at any time; has yer seen any?"

"Yes."

"Oh Holy!"

"Each night."

"Jumping frogs o' Jericho! but has yer?"

"I have."

"The'r natur', pard?"

"Well, it looks as ghosts are said to look."

"Lordy! I s'pects yer lit out."

"No, it scared Grip—"

"Grip?"

"My dog."

"Oh yas."

"It scared Grip badly, and then I went out and had a look at it, and it passed right by and over toward the canyon, and I returned to the canyon, and the next night it took another walk."

"Waal, I'd tuk a walk, an' been still a-walkin' ef I'd a' seen it."

"There is some strange mystery about this place which I intend to solve."

"Be keerful it don't solve you, pard."

"I am always careful, Boss; but now tell me if you have discovered anything about the Vigilante captain?"

"Yas, I hes found out that he are two men."

"Two men?"

"Yas, pard, he hev a double."

"You are sure?"

"Sartin."

"Why do you think so?"

"Waal, I was spyan' round yesterday an' rid out o' town with a Vigilante who was goin' ter nishiate me inter the gang."

"We got to ther lay-out, an' I were nishiated proper with becomin' saremonies, an' ther cap'n were thar."

"Waal, I rides right back ter town an' ther were ther cap'n at ther Ranchero's Exchange, just coming out from dinner."

"I axed how long he had been thar an' they

told me all ther mornin', so I concluded I'd look you up an' spout out my diskivery."

"You did right, Boss; so you are one of the Vigilantes now!"

"I is what they calls a Trial member, an' ef I does O. K., then I gits ter be one in good standin', an' that's what I is layin' fer."

"Well, now, as soon as we have had dinner, you must return to the town and keep a close watch upon this Vigilante captain, and report to me promptly."

"If you should come when I am not here, just put a note—"

"A note?"

"Yes, for you write, don't you?"

"I does; it were knowing that science that got me inter prison; I writ more than I had oughter."

"Ah yes, I recall your telling me the circumstance; well, write me a note and leave it under yonder large rock against the cliff, if I should be away."

"Tain't likely you'll be away is it?"

"I might be."

"I'll do it, but I does hate ghosts an' sich."

"They'll not harm you; it is the living, not the dead, to be dreaded."

"I dreads both."

"Come, now we'll have dinner, and then you can return, and on your way back take a note for me to the Hart ranch."

"I'll do it; who fer? Black Peter?"

"No, it is for Miss Hazel."

"I see," and so saying Boss aided in the pleasant work of preparing dinner and shortly after departed, bearing to Hazel the following letter, without address or signature.

"I am informed by bearer that your foe assuredly has a *doule*, but do all in your power to ascertain the truth of the assertion, and communicate, if necessary, with the one who gives you this, who will tell you where he can be found."

"Thanks to your warning, I got home in safety, when but for it I would have been killed."

"Hence I owe you my life."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE SECOND WARNING.

In spite of the nocturnal prowlings of the apparition, Wild Bill did not seem to dislike the Haunted Ranch, but on the contrary grew attached to his home, seemingly content with the companionship of his dog, horses and cattle, whose wants he looked after as thoroughly as he did his own.

To assure himself that the valley, which was a bowl in the hills, was really as secure as a corral, he made a careful round on foot, and discovered that not in a single place was it possible for the cattle to get out, other than through the narrow canyon, so thoroughly had nature walled it in.

As it was hundreds of acres in size, full of timber mottes, and had a spring-fed lake in it, nothing could be desired for a pasturage, until his herds numbered thousands, for the grass grew there with delicious richness.

Cutting down some trees, Wild Bill soon erected a barrier in the canyon, to prevent the cattle straying out, and considered himself fired.

All around him was wild grandeur, the mountains towering above him and upon either side, and inhabited only by bears, wolves, panthers and other wild beasts.

Beyond, many miles, were the mountains across rolling prairies, where the Indians had a village, and some leagues away the renegade chief, Robin Red Breast, was said to have a stronghold for his marauders, the Dog Soldier Sioux.

But these Wild Bill did not fear, and in calm contentment he was seated in front of his cabin the third day after Boss Bricktop's visit, smoking his after-dinner pipe, when he saw a horse and rider coming over the prairie at a sweeping gallop.

Getting his glass, he turned it upon the comers, and said hastily:

"By Jove! it is Miss Hazel."

As the horse drew nearer, the short riding-habit was more readily discerned, and Wild Bill saw that she had been pressing her horse hard.

He arose and went to the edge of the plateau, where commenced the steep pathway, to meet her, and as she drew rein, lifted her from her saddle, while he said pleasantly:

"I am honored by your visit, Miss Hazel."

"This is no time for compliments, Mr. Hikok, for I have come to warn you of another and a greater danger," she said, excitedly.

"Your last warning served me well, as I wrote you."

"Yes, and as I passed the willow thicket on the creek, I frightened away a pack of coyotes and a flock of buzzards from two human bodies, which showed you turned the tables upon your intended assassins."

"Yes, with Grip's aid."

"Who is Grip?"

"My dog; here, Grip, come and welcome Miss Hazel to our humble ranch."

The bloodhound obeyed by coming near to Hazel, and rubbing his nose against her gloved hand.

"This is your only companion?" she asked with a certain embarrassment of manner.

"Yes, excepting my horses and cattle."

"Ahl that reminds me that I have not told you of your danger, and your horses have gotten you into this scrape."

"My horses!"

"Yes, for I received this note to-day from Poker City, and it was sent by Black Peter, who went into town for stores."

"He was met by the man who brought me the note from you, and he told him to wait about awhile until he wrote a letter to me."

"Here it is."

Wild Bill took the note, which was written in a clerky hand, and read aloud:

"Will the one to whom I gave a letter, from a mutual friend the other day, kindly inform that friend that the Vigilantes intend paying him a visit this afternoon, as he is accused of having horses in his possession he never came by through purchasing them."

"Such a visit from the Vigilantes, and such a charge, can only result in one end, if the friend is found."

"I would warn him myself, but am to form one of the visiting Vigilantes, and intended to send a warning by a messenger I had not full confidence in, until I saw the one in town who now bears this note to you."

"This is certainly from Boss Bricktop, though I had no idea he could write as well, and he has wholly dropped his border dialect in writing, which almost seemed natural to him in conversation," said Wild Bill.

"You take it coolly," said Hazel, in admiration of the man's pluck.

"I'll take the visit of the Vigilantes equally so."

"You assuredly will not remain here to meet them?" said Hazel in alarm.

"Miss Hart, my home is my castle, and humble as it is, and worthless as my life may be, I shall defend both."

"But the Vigilantes are all-powerful."

"I shall meet them."

"God grant you victory; but I fear for the result."

"Whatever the result, you will learn, Miss Hazel, that I did my duty."

A few words more passed between them, and then Hazel Hart arose, and was raised to her saddle by Wild Bill, who said kindly:

"I thank you for all this trouble on my part."

"Good-by."

It was all that she dare trust herself to say, and believing that she looked in his face for the last time, she rode down the steep path, wended her way along the base of the hills, and made a circuit to reach her home, as Wild Bill had advised, fearing she might meet the Vigilantes

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE VIGILANTES MAKE A CALL.

AFTER he had seen Hazel disappear, Wild Bill went into his cabin, and shot off the loads in his rifle, double-barrel shot-gun—the latter a recent purchase in Poker City—and his three revolvers.

Then he cleaned and loaded them with the greatest care, and placed them with his knife and hatchet upon a table back of the door ready for instant use.

Eucher, that was lariated near on the plateau, was then put out to feed in the valley corral, and returning, Wild Bill discovered his foes coming across the prairie.

His face was pale, but calm and stern, and his eyes fairly blazed, as he disrobed himself of all useless toggery, and called Grip into the cabin. Leaning against the cabin he quietly eyed the coming horsemen and muttered:

"Thirteen in all; an unlucky number—for them."

"But I subtract Boss, as he said he would be of the party, and that leaves twelve, a round dozen for us to fight, Grip."

"But you must not come in until the home-stretch."

"I guess we'll get hurt, Grip, but I'm sure some of 'em will be coyote food this night."

The Vigilantes had now approached the foot of the hill and were beginning the ascent, a man of herculean frame, and mounted upon a large horse, in the lead.

"That is Dick Dunn, the Vigilantes' lieutenant in advance, I guess; from what Boss told me about him he looks it."

"I wonder why the captain didn't come?"

"I think I could have entertained him too, and at once have settled the doubt as to this double he claims he has."

"Yes, there is Boss Bricktop, and I must be careful not to hit him when the band begins to play."

These remarks Wild Bill made with the utmost coolness, as he continued in his indolent attitude leaning against the door-frame.

"Well, stranger, how are you?" cried Dick Dunn, a dashing-looking, but evil-faced man of large size, and with a long black beard and hair.

He halted within ten paces of the cabin, and his men drew up in line just behind him, Boss Bricktop looking as innocent as a lamb in the midst of wolves.

"I am well enough," quietly responded Wild Bill.

"You are Wild Bill, I believe?" continued Dunn.

"So my pards call me."

"Won that name in Kansas, by certain wild deeds, I believe?"

"Are you writing a history, pard, that makes you so curious?" asked Wild Bill with a merry twinkle of the eye.

"Oh, no, but I want to be certain that you are the man we are looking for."

"Well, am I?"

"I guess so; what do you think, boys?"

It was the unanimous opinion of the horsemen that he was the very man they were searching for.

"Well, I am as tickled you found me as though I'd run a nail in my foot," said Wild Bill in his sinister way.

"And so are we."

"What do you want with me now you have found me?"

"We wish to look at the horses in your corral and see if we cannot find you didn't get them by buying them."

"No, I got them, excepting one, by killing just such a gang of cowards as you are, whom I caught in deviltry, and who sought to kill me," was the bold reply.

"He admits it, boys; he stole the horses," said Dunn.

"You are a liar; but if you think so you'd better catch me, for I might escape."

"Not you, for we've got you this time, Wild Bill."

"A barking dog never bites," was the prompt response.

"Well, we will just see those horses, and if you have stolen them, up to yonder tree you go," said Dick Dunn savagely.

"Have you got orders for this?"

"Yes, Wild Bill."

"Then go to work now, for I tell you I may get away, while you go to look for the horses."

"Do you dare us to attack you?" asked the Vigilante officer.

"That's about the size of it."

"Dismount! and we'll make this game-cock crow a different tune," cried Dick Dunn, in a rage.

"Back!"

All started at the ringing cry, just as their feet touched the ground.

"Well?" cried the Vigilante lieutenant.

"If any man of your band attempts to enter my cabin, I'll kill him," said Wild Bill, firmly, and with the last word he stepped back within the door and disappeared from sight.

Within the light was dim, for the shutters were closed, while without all was bright, and the forms of the Vigilantes could be distinctly seen by Wild Bill.

"Come, boys, follow me, and you, Boss, as a new member, show what you can do," cried Dick Dunn.

"Oh, I are hear," answered Bricktop, taking good care to get a little to one side.

"Three abreast, now; come!" shouted the Vigilante lieutenant, and the column moved to within a few paces of the door and halted, while Dick Dunn called out:

"Wild Bill, do you surrender and stand your trial?"

"I am not that kind of a man," was the answer.

"You shall have a fair trial," said Dunn, anxious to get possession of the man without facing his deadly aim, for he knew the Pistol Dead Shot would bring down some of them, and he might himself have his usefulness cut short by a bullet.

"Yes, Vigilante trials are always fair, for they hang a man and try him afterward," said Bill from within his stronghold.

"You will be taken, and then it will be the worst for you."

"It will be the worst for some of you before I am."

"I'll promise you your life if you surrender and join our band."

"Your promise is worth nothing to me, and, although I have been so unfortunate as to have frequently to take life, I will never ally myself with a band of outlaws such as you are."

"Once more—do you surrender?"

"Come in and see."

"We will show you no mercy."

"Wait until I beg for it, and, if the gang is going to attack, begin at once, or I'll set the music g."

"Charge!"

The word was fairly yelled from the lips of Dick Dunn, and with a long-drawn breath the band of Vigilantes moved toward the cabin.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WILD BILL AT BAY.

WHETHER the Vigilantes expected that their yells would intimidate Wild Bill, when their threats had failed to do so, or not, is not known; but certain it is they went at the cabin with a series of war-whoops that would have made an Indian turn pale with envy.

But in the midst of their yells came the ring of a rifle, and Dick Dunn fell dead just inside of the doorway, a bullet through his heart.

Over his body sprung the now enraged and bloodthirsty Vigilantes, and as two of them rushed toward Wild Bill, two loud reports rung out and the shot-gun's contents was emptied into their bodies.

But it would not do now to hesitate, and on swarmed the rest of the band, and, with a revolver in either hand, Wild Bill met them, firing with a precision and nerve that never deserted him, and four more of his assailants incumbered the cabin floor.

But six—not counting Boss Bricktop, who though in the fight was not a murderous member—remained, and these all knew that their shots had also taken effect on the daring man who opposed them, though no vital spot had been touched, and for their own credit they dare not go back to Poker City and report that the one they had intended to hang as a horse-thief, had whipped the whole of them.

Rushing upon him in a mass, they forced him to drop his pistols, for the work was too close; but he seized his hatchet in one hand and his bowie in the other, and met them with these deadly weapons.

A fearful blow over the head with a rifle, laid open his scalp, just as a knife was driven to the bone in his arm, and he went down upon his knees; but instantly he arose to again fall, as a bullet struck him in the leg.

But again only for an instant was he down, and the man who sprung upon him to drive his bowie to his heart, fell back with a cloven skull, and once more the desperate man was upon his feet, and in wild dismay, Boss setting the example, having vainly called to his comrades to fly, the survivors took to their heels.

But the hot blood of Wild Bill was up and seizing one of his revolvers from the floor he staggered out in pursuit and dropped another foe, his ninth, as he was running away, and sent a bullet after another as he mounted his horse, wounding him so severely that he had to be held in his saddle by his comrades.

Down the steep hill, helter-skelter they went, the four survivors, and one of them sorely wounded.

Suddenly one of them called out that his horse was wounded, for the maddened man they had attacked still sent shots flying after them; but they would not wait for him, and continuing on their way at wild speed, these frightened, demoralized men reached Poker City, one of whom died soon after their story of the fearful fight was told.

And Wild Bill, drenched in his own blood, wounded and in anguish, by his own iron will held up until his enemies were in wild flight, and then tottered toward his cabin, staggering,

"Then ther Dead Shot threw down ther gun and he tuk a revolver in each hand, and Lordy love all o' us, but ther music then begun, fer we was firin' our shootin'-irons, an' ther work were hot.

"We got ther Dead Shot down, but up he riz; we hit him, struck him, shot him, but he jist thought it pie.

"We yelled, an' he said nothin'; ther pistols made music as was funeral marches, an' his big dog, what were shot up in ther next room howled terrible, barked frightful, an' tore up awful, an' ef he'd got at us, we'd been chawed up for parrot food, same as crackers.

"Waal, I thought then ther fight lasted some weeks; but now I knows it wasn't many minutes, an' then, seein', as somebody must git out ter tell ther tale, I kinder dropped back, an' ther boys were willin' ter foller.

"But thar come that howlin' terror arter us, a hatchet in one hand and a revolver in t'other, an' down dropped Jim Kearney right outside ther door, an' Jack McCandlis tuk his dose o' pills, as he got onto his horse.

"My horse, as we went down ther hill, fell, an' I thought he were wounded, an' so called to ther boys ter wait.

"But they were goin' hell-ter-split home-wards, an' I jist laid low, until I see my critter were all right, havin' jist stepped on a rock that flung him.

"While I were thar I seen Wild Bill look arter ther boys, not seein' me, fer I lay low, an' then he bu'st inter a laff, as though he'd hed plenty o' fun, an' went back inter ther cabin.

"Then I lit out, an' when I got out onto ther pararer, looked back, an' thar he were, seemin' not ter mind his wounds, an' durned ef I believes we hurt him much, though I knows we hit him often.

"Now, gents, pards and hearers, I, fer one, decides that he didn't steal them horses, an' a man as hes did what he done, sh'd be left alone ontill kingdom come."

"You are right, Bricktop, and I'll see that he is not troubled by the Vigilantes again, unless he does some lawless act to give us a hold upon him."

The speaker was Dagger Don, the Vigilante captain, who had come in just as Boss began his story, which the reader has observed steered clear of the truth in some particulars, and the sentiments of the Don were echoed by the crowd, in whose estimation Wild Bill had suddenly become the greatest of heroes through his desperate fight.

But there were several present who had lost friends in that fight that secretly swore vengeance against the Pistol Dead Shot whenever opportunity offered to seek redress for their fancied wrongs.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE SHADOW FROM THE HAPPY HUNTING-GROUNDS.

THAT Wild Bill's escape from death in his remarkable encounter had been marvelous, none who saw him but would admit, and wonder how a human being could resist successfully such odds, and live under such wounds.

But fortunately the bullet wound in his side had glanced on his ribs, the one in his shoulder had passed only through the flesh, and the severe cut in his head had not broken the bone, while the other cuts and bullet wounds were not of a serious nature to such a man as he was.

Though fearfully sore the next day, when Red Dove returned from the village of her people, bringing the herbs needed by the medicine chief, Wild Bill felt better after his wounds were skillfully dressed by Black Bear, and his weakness from loss of blood was his greatest drawback.

But Black Bear loved his daughter as the idol of his heart, and he hated the renegade, Robin Red Breast, with all the intensity of his nature, so that the man who saved Red Dove from his power won the old chief's love, and he was untiring in his devotions to the pale-face stranger, whose desperate fight was a marvel to him.

Red Dove also remained at the Haunted Ranch, aiding all in her power, and Grip, who had been released from his confinement by the Indian maiden, looked upon them with kindly eyes, when he saw that they were ministering to the wants of his master.

Upon seeing the immense dog, Black Bear had said to Wild Bill that if he had gotten

loose to join in the fight not one of the assassins would have escaped to tell the tale.

"That is very true, chief," replied Wild Bill; but he kept to himself the real secret of why he had not released the dog.

At first it was his intention to have Grip aid in the defense; but remembering at a late moment, upon entering the cabin, that Boss Bricktop was forced to be among the attacking party, he feared that he might be the object of Grip's attention, and to save that worthy villain he preferred to stand alone in the fracas.

That Grip felt hurt was evident, for he showed it upon coming out that his master had slighted an opportunity for him to do full justice to Vigilante flesh; but seeing that Bill was suffering, he forgave him, licked his hand, and remained near by to be of service if needed.

The third night after the fight, Grip, who was in the cabin, suddenly darted out with an angry bark, but soon returned as if satisfied that no danger threatened the cabin, though his actions caused Wild Bill to tell Black Bear that there was some one without.

The chief went out of the cabin but came bounding back with a scared face.

"What is it, chief?" coolly asked Wild Bill.

"A shadow from the Happy Hunting-Grounds," he said, with evident emotion.

"Oh! you have seen my ghost?"

The chief nodded, and Red Dove went to the door; but she too returned, and evidently had seen the same object that had so moved her father.

"It is a death shadow," she said, in a hushed voice.

"Yes, it is the ghost of this ranch, for you know it is said to be haunted," said Bill.

"We Indians have heard of it, and few ever come near here; but you live here?" she said, softly:

"Why not? I have seen the ghost often, and it has done me no harm, and I cannot say as much for those who are not ghosts,

"Which way was it going?"

"Toward the canyon."

"Yes, and coming from the graves in the thicket?"

"Yes, white chief."

"That's its favorite walk; but hark! there is a hoof-fall without."

Black Bear went to the door, and started back, as in the darkness he beheld a horse and rider.

But ere he could raise the rifle he carried in his hand, came the words:

"I would see the ranchero known as Wild Bill."

At the voice Wild Bill started, for he recognized who was the speaker, and said, hurriedly:

"Take her horse, chief, and ask her to come in, for she is my friend; but is she alone?"

"Yes," answered Black Bear, and he stepped outside, and with a gallantry not to be expected from an Indian, lifted Hazel from her saddle, for she it was who had made the midnight visit to the Haunted Ranch.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

JEALOUSY.

"MISS HAZEL, this is indeed kind of you; but you risk much to come here," said Bill, clasping the tiny hand, as the maiden, with her riding-habit drawn around her, came forward softly and bent over him.

"And you are sorely wounded," she said, in a voice that trembled.

"Yes, but for your warning, sent you by Bricktop, I would have been killed."

"Thirteen against you?" she said, with admiration.

"No, only twelve, for Bricktop was but a lay-figure in the fight."

"And McCandlis has since died, making ten who fell."

"I knew he would, for I had dead aim on him as he rode away," was the quiet response.

"It was marvelous; you are a wonderful man, Mr. Hikok."

"Thank you, Miss Hazel; I am a strangely lucky man in always getting out ahead of the hounds; but it was brave of you to come this far to see me."

"I would have gone further, for I owe much to you; but I have brought you some little things I thought you might find useful," and going to the door, she brought back a large basket, upon which Grip had had his weather eye, having scented out its contents to be edibles.

The basket contained delicacies that were seldom seen in a border sick-room, and a cow-

boy had had a long ride to the nearest fort to get them.

Then there was a roll of lint, medicines, a flask of brandy and numerous little nick-nacks which only a loving woman would think of.

Wild Bill expressed his thanks warmly, and then Hazel asked:

"And your nurses, are they good to you?"

"I could not have better, for one is Black Bear, the Sioux Medicine Chief, and the other his daughter, known as Red Dove the Sioux Queen."

"I met her, you remember?" said Hazel somewhat coldly.

"Ah, yes: well, she came with her father the evening following the fight, to thank me for saving her, and seeing my condition, they have devoted themselves to me ever since, and have more than repaid the debt of gratitude they considered that they owed me."

"The Medicine Chief has great skill, for I have heard that the surgeons at the fort have availed themselves of his herb medicines in sickness and wounds."

"Yes, he is a wonderful doctor, and I confess that in a hospital, I could not have convalesced as I have; but let Red Dove get you some supper, Miss Hazel."

"Thank you, no; I must return at once, but if you at any time feel that you care to have the nursing of pale-faces instead of red-skins, you have but to send for me, and I will come with Black Peter and Nance."

"It is very kind of you, Miss Hazel; but within a week or so, I'll be on my feet."

"Mr. Hikok, as I came up the hill I saw a strange form, which glided rather than walked, along the plateau, going toward the canyon.

"It had a peculiar light about it, that showed it distinctly even in the darkness, and were I a believer in the supernatural I would take solemn oath I had seen a ghost."

"It is my ghost, Miss Hazel."

"Your ghost?"

"Yes, I guess it's mine, for nobody else claims it."

"What do you mean, Mr. Hikok?"

"You know this ranch is said to be haunted!"

"Yes."

"Well, to be haunted, a ghost must be around, and that is the spook, spirit or witch."

"You have seen it then?"

"Often, and Black Bear and his daughter had just seen it when you rode up."

"It is most strange."

"It is indeed; but some fine night I am going ghost-hunting, and if I capture it you may have it for a pet."

"Oh, Mr. Hikok, don't talk that way, for it is awful to jest about such things."

He saw that the sight of the ghostly form had really impressed the maiden and continued:

"Don't fear, it is some trick to scare me away from here."

"But, who could play such a trick?"

"That's what I intend some day to find out, Miss Hazel."

Hazel made no reply, but bidding Wild Bill good-by, turned and left the cabin, Black Bear bringing her horse to the door, and raising her to her saddle with the grace of a courtier.

Wondering why Red Dove had not shown herself she rode down the steep path, to suddenly draw rein as she reached the lowlands, for a form stood in her path.

"Who are you?" asked Hazel firmly, and she drew her revolver, which she never went without.

"Only an Indian girl, poor Red Dove, a Sioux maiden, who begs you not to steal the heart of the great white chief from her."

The words were softly spoken, the tone plaintive; but Hazel replied coldly:

"I seek the heart of no one unasked, Red Dove."

"Stand aside and allow me to pass."

"The Red Dove has begged the rich, beautiful pale-face maiden, not to break her heart; next time she will not beg, but act."

The tone was now haughty and she stepped aside with this threat, and Hazel rode on, a great weight upon her heart.

And Red Dove, hoping, dreading, loving and revengeful, returned to the cabin, and her post by the side of the wounded pale-face whom she idolized with all the intensity of her passionate nature.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

CAUGHT NAPPING.

As Wild Bill had prognosticated, he was on his feet in a couple of weeks, and within a

month was what he called a well man, though he was yet weak, and his wounds had not all healed.

But he was able to dismiss his kind nurses, and Black Bear and Red Dove returned to their village, the maiden with a heavy heart, for no word of love had been breathed to her by the man she had so tenderly nursed.

Several days after the visit of Hazel Hart to the cabin, Boss Bricktop had put in an appearance, bringing with him many little things he had purchased, which he thought Wild Bill would need, and a budget full of news.

Among his revelations he said:

"Ther Vigilantes hev concluded ter let yer alone, as they say they does admire a man o' uncommon pluck; but I thinks it are 'cause they is afeerd o' yer."

"Ther cap'n says yer is a whole team an' a horse ter let, with a fifth wheel throw'd in, an' he are yer friend; but that assertion o' his'n makes me watch him ther more, as he are a slip'ry fox, you bet, pard."

"Waal, he are two pussons, I is sartin, or He kin be in two places at ther same time, as ther were a big horse-stealin' goin' on up country a few days ago, an' a gang o' rancheros come down ter Poker City hot, fer they said ther Vigilantes hed did it, fer Dare Devil Don were at the'r head."

"But thar were Devil Don laid up with fever, and then they see their mistake."

"But I is watchin' an' I hopes ter catch ther weasel asleep yet, pard."

"Do so, and I'll give you five hundred dollars."

"Make it four hundred, pard Bill, fer five hundred are ther sum I put on that check, an' it bain't a luck number ter me."

"Well, I'll give you what you like if you can corner him; but don't fail to watch close whether any move is made against the Hart ranch, as I fear they will try that same game over."

"I'll do it."

"Now I wish you to buy in Poker City for me a Colt's Repeating Rifle, for me to give Black Bear, and a pair of the finest small revolvers you can find for Red Dove."

"It'll tickle 'em same as they'd swallowed a feather."

"They deserve them for their kindness to me; there is my purse, take what money you need, and bring them on your next visit."

"If you wish any money for yourself, take it, for you are welcome."

"Pard, you is ther whitest man in these parts, an' yer is makin' a Christian out o' me," said Boss with real feeling.

Helping himself to what he needed for the purchases, and a little for a stake for himself, he left the cabin and wended his way back to the town.

But two days after he returned with the fire-arms, and they were better than Wild Bill had expected Parker City could produce.

To say that Black Bear and Red Dove were delighted, would but poorly express their feelings, for they were so pleased that Bricktop whispered:

"Didn't I tell yer 'twould tickle 'em!"

"Why you'd think ther ole red hed swallowed a pound o' feathers."

And thus the days passed away at the Haunted Ranch, and the nights revealed the never-failing-to-appear ghost on its regular walk.

But though Grip had learned to regard its coming without emotion, neither Black Bear or Red Dove could bring themselves to look upon it again.

A month passed away, and, as I have said, the two faithful nurses returned to their village in the mountains far away, having exacted from Wild Bill a promise that he would visit them there, that the braves of the Sioux tribe might look upon a man who single-handed had defeated a dozen.

Feeling quite himself again, Wild Bill looked after his ranch, though for a few days it was very lonely, and the nocturnal ghostly visitant was even a relief to him.

Finding that he was able to ride a long distance, he determined to start on the following day for Parker City, to prosecute his inquiries about the Don's double, and to purchase a supply of stores, together with a few more cattle and horses.

He had already trained Grip to go and drive up any horse he wanted from the valley, and determined to make an early start, he called the dog and said:

"Hi, Grip! go after Eucher!"

The intelligent dog bounded away, and lowering the stockade for him in the canyon, Wild Bill returned to his cabin.

But, as he stepped in the door he suddenly beheld half a dozen revolvers thrust into his face and heard the stern words:

"Wild Bill, you are my game."

CHAPTER XXXV.

AN OLD REVENGE.

WILD BILL, who had not been absent fifteen minutes from the cabin, had little dreamed of confronting a foe, as his eyes had not been off the steep and only approach up the hillside.

Caught napping as it were, he yet did not lose his presence of mind for an instant, but said calmly:

"Well, you've fairly caught me, and if I mistake not, I am the prisoner of Robin Red Breast, the Renegade."

"You are; but you do not recognize me under my red paint."

"I can see only that your breast is as red as your paint. Who are you, and what do you want with me?"

"That you shall know when I have you safe in my camp."

"Hold out your hands."

Wild Bill quietly obeyed, for there were four revolvers covering him, held in red hands which he well knew were not painted.

Instantly upon the wrists Robin Red Breast slipped a pair of steel handcuffs.

"You go well supplied and keep up some of your ideas of civilization," sneered Bill.

"Yes, these are better than ropes, as I have had cause to know myself."

As the renegade spoke he took a lariat and securely bound the hands to the belt, removing the revolvers and knife.

"Now, Jim Hikok, you will come with me without trouble," he said.

"Certainly."

They led him from the cabin, along the cliff a few paces, and then Wild Bill saw how they had gotten to the cabin.

Over the cliff hung a couple of stout lariats, showing that they had descended from that way.

"Ah, if I had caught you, what nice pistol practice I'd had," he said.

"But you didn't catch us; but I know if you had, our days would have been numbered, for, from all reports, you deserve the name of Pistol Dead Shot."

"That was a fierce fight of yours, Hikok."

"Yes; and our little affair when I took Red Dove from you wasn't a slow one, renegade."

"Not very."

"You made good time getting off."

"By the Lord! I had to," said the Red Breast, with a laugh.

"As you've been wounded, I'll hoist you gently," he said.

"Do you intend to hang me?"

"You take it cool. No, we intend to raise you to the top of the cliff and carry you to my mountain den."

"I am honored in being your guest, Red Breast," sneered Bill.

The renegade made no reply, but ordered his men to fasten the two lariats firmly around Bill's waist, and hauled some one on the top of the cliff.

Instantly two painted visages looked over.

"Draw him up," he ordered, in the Sioux tongue, and Wild Bill arose in mid-air and was safely landed on the cliff.

Dropping the lariats over again, the Red Breast and his four Indian braves followed, and Wild Bill saw that he was in the power of the Red Breast and a score of red skin warriors.

"You see," said Robin Red Breast, as he observed Bill glancing over the crowd. "I had heard of your whipping a dozen whites, so came with a score of reds for you to try your hand upon."

"If I was in the same place, and armed as they, I'd try it on with you before I submitted," was the reckless reply.

"I don't doubt it, for you have a knack of avoiding death, and have reduced killing to a science."

"As a boy you begun well in taking life."

"Who the deuce are you, or were you, when you were at home?" said Bill, striving to recall where they had met before.

"Do you remember when you were on the canal tow-path as rider?"

"Yes."

"You prevented the boat, carrying a treasure, from being robbed one night."

"Yes."

"You killed two of the party, but one got away."

"Ha! You are Captain Calvin Clement, the former superintendent of the canal company."

"I was Calvin Clement, Jim Hikok, but I am now Robin Red Breast, the Renegade Chief of the Dog Sioux."

"Yes, and with a blacker heart than any Indian in the band," said Bill fearlessly.

"We'll not discuss that, sir; the company treated me badly—"

"When you stole from them."

"They treated me badly, I say, and I sought to get even, and would have gotten a clean thirty thousand in gold, but for you."

"I bear your bullet-mark in my cheek; but I got away and swore some day to be avenged on you, and, as you took from me the other day a captive, I have two scores to settle with you."

"I don't scare worth a cent, Robin Red Breast."

"Oh! I know you've got nerve, and I know you are a giant in strength and a dead shot; but you are in my power now, and nothing on earth can save you."

"While there's life, there's hope, old man."

"Come, I will not parley with you."

Far back from the cliff they found horses awaiting them, and mounting these they rode away toward the stronghold of the White Renegade Chief.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

RED-SKIN TRAILERS.

As Wild Bill was suspended in mid-air, being hauled over the cliff, the eyes of two persons were upon him.

Those two sat on their horses half-way up the steep path leading to the cabin, and were concealed by a thicket from the view of those on the cliff.

They had been coming to the ranch, and their ponies carried heavy loads of what appeared to be dressed skins of buffalo, bear and other wild animals.

One of the riders was a young warrior, with a face not as red in hue as the full blooded Indian, and there was about him a certain air of calm repose and nobility seldom seen in a red-skin.

He was fancifully attired, wore one feather, to denote his first rank as a chief, and sat his horse with conscious power.

The other the reader has before seen, for it was Red Dove the Sioux Queen, and the young warrior was her brother Iron Eyes.

Together they were coming to visit the great white hunter, and arrived in time to see him made a prisoner, and by whom they well knew, for they recognized the Robin Red Breast.

Awaiting, until they were certain the Indians had gone with their captive, they approached the cabin just as Grip came dashing up with Eucher before him.

The dog missed his master at once, and seemed to realize that something had happened; but devoted to Red Dove he waited for her to take the initiative in finding him.

In their joy at the capture of Wild Bill, and their haste to get away in safety with their captive, the Dog Soldier Sioux had disturbed nothing, not even the weapons of the ranchero, which Robin Red Breast had taken from him and laid on the table.

It was getting dark, but the brother and sister determined to at once follow the Dog Soldiers and trust to strategy to get the captive away, as they knew that force would accomplish nothing.

Of course in the darkness they could not follow the trail themselves; but Red Dove thought of Grip, and at once it was decided to in some way reach the top of the cliff, and this was done by shooting an arrow, to which a string was attached, over the trunk of a tree growing near the edge.

To the end of the string a couple of lariats, tied together, were attached, and then were drawn over the limb, and sailor-fashion, up to the top went Iron Eyes with the greatest of ease.

Next followed Grip, who submitted to being harnessed in the ends of the lariates, and was safely drawn to the top, greatly to his delight, for he did not relish his trip in midair in the least.

Red Dove then followed, and it was decided

that she and Grip should follow the trail, while Iron Eyes, mounted on a fresh horse from the valley corral, and leading Eucher and an animal for her, should ride around the mountain and meet her at the other side.

The horses had already been caught, the Indians' saddles transferred to their backs, and Wild Bill's elegant Mexican tree and bridle put on Eucher, and the young warrior started, having thrown the presents of his father, sister and self to the ranchero, into the cabin and locked the door securely.

It was a long ride round, but Iron Eyes reached the designated point at midnight, and found Red Dove there awaiting him with Grip.

"The Dog Sioux have passed and kept straight on," she said.

"We will rest and have supper and follow," answered her brother; and two hours after they were again on the trail, Grip following the scent unerringly.

Before dawn they entered the mountains, in which they knew was the stronghold of the Robin Red Breast, and here they halted until daylight.

With the first streak of dawn they resumed their way, and after a ride of a couple of leagues knew that the camp must be very near.

Seeking a secluded retreat, in the very fastnesses of the mountains, Iron Eyes left his sister, Grip and the horses there, while he went off alone on a scout.

She knew that there was no better trailer, or braver warrior in the tribe, and feared not to trust him, and lay down to rest.

But within several hours he returned, and told her that he had gained a point where he could see the whole village of the Dog Soldier Sioux, from the top of a huge pine tree which he had climbed.

The prisoner he had distinctly seen led into the Council Tepee, and that meant, he well knew, that within three days he must die.

Red Dove seemed for a moment almost crushed by the news; but after thinking awhile she said:

"Will my brother Iron Eyes enter the Dog Sioux village for me?"

The young warrior looked surprise at her strange request, but answered promptly:

"The Iron Eyes will."

"He can go with his lance at rest and his head bent."

"As a warrior who bears a message?"

"Yes."

"He will go."

"Let him tell the Robin Red Breast that the Red Dove will be his captive if he will set free the great white hunter."

"No, the Red Dove shall not," said the young warrior, firmly.

"Then she will go herself."

"No, Iron Eyes will go; but why would the Red Dove give herself to the wicked Robin?"

"She loves the white hunter."

"The Robin Red Breast will make a dog of her."

"No, she will not remain with him."

"The Iron Eyes cannot see," said the mystified warrior.

"She will spread her wings and fly back to her people."

The warrior shook his head dubiously.

"Yes, she will never be the squaw of the Robin."

"The Iron Eyes will go," answered the youthful warrior, placing perfect faith in his sister, and rising, he equipped himself for his dangerous errand and departed for the village of the Dog Soldier Sioux.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE RED DOVE'S SACRIFICE.

WHEN Wild Bill had been carried to the mountain village of the Renegade Chief, he was, after awhile, placed in the council tent of the tribe, there to remain until the Robin Red Breast devised some torture by which to slowly kill him, for his crimes having made him fly to the worst band of Indians for refuge, he had become more devilish in his cruelties than were the savages themselves.

Rejoicing in having his old enemy, against whom he had sworn revenge, wholly in his power, he wished to have his mind tortured as to what would be his fate, enjoying the prisoner's suffering, as the cruel cat does the efforts of the mouse to escape from her merciless claws.

He had thrown himself down to rest, after

enjoying a hearty breakfast following his return, when he was aroused by a warrior, who reported a stranger having come into the village, with bowed head and white feathers on his lance-head.

"A Cheyenne?" asked the Red Breast.

"No, a Sioux of Black Bears' people," was the Indian's answer.

"Lead him here," and the Red Breast put on his chief's bonnet, and bedaubed his face with war paint to receive him.

It was Iron Eyes, and he entered the presence of the great renegade with the humble step of one who had come on a mission of peace.

Robin Red Breast eyed the young warrior closely and said:

"You are Iron Eyes?"

"The chief speaks straight."

"The son of Black Bear?"

"Yes, chief."

"Why do you come here, when the war-paint is on the faces of your people and mine?"

"My lance has its paint covered with white feathers."

"True, and that protects you; but what would the Black Bear with me?"

"The Black Bear knows not of my coming; but the Iron Eyes would know if the Robin Red Breast would wish to have in his power the Red Dove?"

"Ha!"

With this exclamation the eyes of the renegade fairly blazed with exultation.

He had loved the Red Dove, and sought her love two years before, when he was a chief in Black Bear's tribe; but she had refused him with disdain, as she hated him.

In revenge he had kidnapped her and sought to take her to the Dog Soldier Sioux band, which he had made up his mind to join.

But Iron Eyes himself although a boy had pursued and retaken his sister, and the renegade had been forced to fly to the Dog Soldiers who warmly welcomed him, and soon after made him their chief.

Going in disguise to the settlement he met Hazel Hart, visiting her father as a Texas cattle-man, and at once sought to gain her love.

But she met his advances coldly, and he swore revenge, and being in league with another discarded suitor of hers, entered into the devilish plot to place the Red Dove in his power, if he would give him possession of Hazel, whom he intended to force into a marriage with him, for a purpose which shall yet be revealed.

But the ally was also playing him false, and the plots of both were overthrown by the rescue of the two maidens by Wild Bill.

Not knowing that this ally meant treachery toward him, he thought, if he could gain possession of the Red Dove, he would place Hazel in his power as an exchange, and to this end he was working, and felt that to get Wild Bill out of the way would be a great step toward its accomplishment.

He was therefore delighted when the Iron Eyes suggested his getting possession of the Red Dove, and, after a moment's thought answered him:

"Yes, I would like the Red Dove, the Sioux Queen."

"The Robin Red Breast can have her."

"Does the Iron Eyes mean it?"

"The Iron Eyes has no crooked tongue."

"Ah! well, you want something in return?"

"Yes."

"I knew it: what does the Iron Eyes want?"

"The Robin Red Breast has a prisoner?"

"Many of them."

"One known as a great white hunter?"

"Ahl who does the Iron Eyes mean?"

"The Pistol Dead Shot."

"The devil! how did the Iron Eyes know this?"

"He has eyes."

"So I see, and good ones too, to make this discovery almost as soon as I knew it myself."

"Well, what of the Dead Shot?"

"The Iron Eyes will give him the Red Dove for the Pistol Dead Shot."

The renegade started visibly.

He bent his piercing eyes upon the young warrior, as though to read his inmost soul.

There was something in all this he could not understand.

The young Sioux offering to give up his beautiful sister, for the possession of Wild Bill.

"Why does the Iron Eyes make this offer?" he asked.

"Why should the Robin wish to read the heart of the Iron Eyes?" was the calm response.

The renegade was silent for a few moments.

To get Hazel into his power by his own efforts he knew to be almost impossible, for his warriors would not follow him as far into the settlements as the Hart ranch, and had disliked even going after Wild Bill.

But with the Red Dove his captive, he could get possession of Hazel, he thought, through an exchange with his ally, and he felt assured that Wild Bill, if free, would return to the Haunted Ranch, and his chance for revenge upon him would only be put off for a short time.

So he decided on the exchange of his prisoner for the Red Dove, and said:

"When will the Iron Eyes make this exchange?"

"To-night."

"Where?"

"At the Willow Creek."

"At what point?"

"The buffalo crossing."

"At what hour?"

"When the night turns."

"Midnight, you mean?"

"Yes, chief."

"I will be there with the prisoner."

"The Robin Red Breast must come alone with the prisoner."

"Does the Iron Eyes take me for a fool?"

"The Robin will remember the Willow Creek runs between hills, with prairie, a pony's run on either side."

"Yes."

"He will leave his warriors in the hills, and come alone with the hunter to the creek."

"Yes."

"The Iron Eyes will come from the hills alone with the Red Dove."

"I see."

"Does the Iron Eyes speak straight?"

"As straight as any Injun can speak, for you'd make a fox envious of your cunning; but the Robin will be there with the hunter if the Iron Eyes says at noon to-morrow."

The young Sioux questioned with a look why in the daytime.

"Because," said the renegade, understanding him, "the darkness covers a multitude of sins, and may cover a multitude of your old father's warriors."

"Say noonday, and I'll be there."

"The Robin Red Breast has spoken, and the Iron Eyes will be there with the Red Dove," and refusing all hospitality offered him, the young Indian left the village, where hundreds gazed longingly upon his scalp-lock.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

SEEKING THE RENDEZVOUS.

THAT Wild Bill was greatly surprised the following morning after his arrival in the Dog Sioux* camp, to be told to mount a horse and leave the village, there can be no doubt, for he well knew that his foe intended putting him to death, yet did not relinquish hope.

His guards led him to the head of a band of two hundred horsemen, where Calvin Clement, the renegade chief, and his old foe, awaited him.

He was bound to his horse, and his wrists still wore the steel cuffs.

Robin Red Breast nodded as he rode up, and said, as he moved forward, his warriors following:

"You were born under a lucky star, Jim Hikok."

"So I've found out, and you under a dog star, which is a sure sign you'll some day be hanged."

The renegade smiled away the frown that came upon his brow at the words, and remarked:

"I have been torturing my brain to find the best torture to put you to."

"Well, what have you decided upon?" was the cool question.

"I first thought I would tie you to a stake and burn you."

"That's an old style of refined Indian cruelty; but I should think a man like you could find something more terrible."

* The author would here state that the name of "Dog Soldier Sioux" was given to renegades from the different Sioux regular tribes, who formed themselves into bands of marauders, under desperate chiefs, and sometimes under the command of renegade whites.

"So I thought, as the flames would soon kill you."

"Then I thought that if I tied you on the back of a mustang, like a Mazeppa, and turned your horse loose in the mountains, the wolves would run you down and tear you to pieces."

"Yes, that would be enjoyable—for you, and the other wolves."

"No, for I would not see your misery."

"I forgot; what next did you decide upon?"

"To give you up."

"Give me up!"

"Yes."

"To what?"

"To your friends."

"Who, for instance?"

"The Sioux."

"Do as you please; you know I am not interested," said Wild Bill, calmly, though a ray of hope flashed through his heart.

"There is to be a bargain, though."

"Ah! what do the Sioux consider me worth?"

"The Red Dove."

"What?" and Wild Bill's face paled.

"They are to give me the Red Dove for you."

"Never!"

"I say yes."

"And I say I will never consent to it."

"On, yes, you will."

"I will not, Calvin Clement, you base hound of hell."

"You'll not be asked."

"I will not allow it."

"You are in irons, and bound securely; if you say more I will gag you, and the Sioux will simply take the lariat of your horse and lead him away with you on his back, while I do the same with the Red Dove."

"Curses on you, renegade that you are, I will tell her not to submit, and—"

The chief suddenly turned toward him and placed his hand upon his shoulder, while he called to his warriors near to aid him in gagging the prisoner.

This was done with the aid of pieces of buckskin and blanket being wrapped around a stick, which was placed in his mouth, and a strap fastened behind his head held it there firmly.

At first wild Bill thought of struggling; but he knew it would do no good, and he kept quiet, submitting to his fate.

On they rode, and the renegade chief went on:

"You should have kept your tongue still, Hikok; but forewarned is forearmed, and now you will be quiet and the exchange will be made; yet why the Red Dove makes this sacrifice I cannot understand."

"As it is, I'll not bother my head about finding out, so that I get possession of her."

"Now yonder is our meeting-place, and here I must leave my warriors as soon as it is time for us to go and meet our friends."

Calling to two of his warriors, the cunning chief bade them ride from the hills where they were across the three miles of prairie to the Willow Creek, and reconnoiter up and down for a mile, to see that no foes were concealed there.

For two hours all waited the return of the warriors, whose movements were plainly visible as they approached the fringe of willows bordering the creek.

Then they were seen to go, one up, the other down, and disappear from sight.

But again they appeared, and returned at a gallop to their friends and reported not a soul in sight.

As no one could leave the opposite hills, and cross the few miles of prairie that intervened to the creek, without being seen, the renegade seemed to fear no treachery, and taking the rein of his prisoner's horse, started toward the buffalo crossing, which was the designated rendezvous of Iron Eyes.

As the two left the hillside they beheld two sons leave the opposite range, and, with his glass, Robin Red Breast recognized the young warrior and Red Dove, and he smiled in anticipation of triumph, for he had laid a plan of deviltry to carry out when they should meet among the willows.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE MEETING IN THE WILLOWS.

ONCE upon the level prairie, both Robin Red Breast and Wild Bill lost sight of the two Indians; but the former had arranged with his warriors for signals, should any treachery be

noticed, and he saw nothing to cause him to suspect that more than Red Dove and her brother were coming to meet them.

It was a half-hour's ride to the willows, at the buffalo ford, and the first to arrive were Robin Red Breast and his prisoner, and halting at the bank of the creek they waited for the coming of the others, glimpses of whom now and then could be seen through the trees.

Presently they appeared on the opposite shore, and the renegade, holding tight to the rein of the prisoner's horse, crossed the ford to meet them.

"Well, the Iron Eyes has spoken truly, and the Robin Red Breast is glad to greet the Red Dove."

The maiden made no reply, but looked stern and calm, while she glanced quickly at the prisoner, and seeing that he was so securely bound and gagged, asked coldly:

"Does the Red Breast even fear to hear the White Hunter's voice?"

"No; but he swore that he would not consent to the exchange, and so I gagged him to silence him."

"Let the Red Dove understand; the Iron Eyes told the Red Breast he would give the Red Dove for the Dead Shot;" and she rode close up to the renegade.

"He did?"

"What wants the Red Breast with the Red Dove?"

"The Robin Red Breast loves the Red Dove," was the evasive reply.

"And why sought the Robin the White Hunter?"

"For revenge!" savagely said the renegade.

"He loves the Red Dove well to give up his revenge for her?" she inquiringly said.

"Yes."

"The Iron Eyes made this bargain?"

"He did."

"The Robin Red Breast is the prisoner of the Red Dove."

Quick as a flash of lightning she raised the hand that had been hanging down in the folds of her buckskin skirt, and the muzzle of a revolver was pressed hard against the head of the renegade.

Calvin Clement was a man of undoubted courage, and possessed of great nerve, and not a movement did he make, as he saw that his life would be the forfeit.

He knew the girl, and he saw that she had him dead, if he moved, and that her act was as great a surprise to her brother as to him and Wild Bill, as the expressions on their faces plainly indicated.

In his belt were his revolvers; but one hand held his reins, the other had hold of the lariat that led the prisoner's horse, and he dared not drop one or the other, as the shot must follow that ended his days.

This tableau lasted for an instant only, and then the renegade said in a reproofful tone:

"The Red Dove has broken faith with the Robin."

"The Robin talks with a crooked tongue, for the Red Dove made no compact with him."

"The Iron Eyes went to the Robin Red Breast and asked if he would exchange the Hunter for the Red Dove, and he agreed to meet the Robin here."

"The Iron Eyes believed the Red Dove meant to give herself into the power of a snake, but she would have done so only to save the Hunter from death."

"She came here prepared to take the Red Robin, if in her power, and he is her prisoner."

"Let the Iron Eyes bind the Robin Red Breast."

The young warrior, who seemed to be now thoroughly swayed by his sister, quietly dismounted, threw the coil of his lariat over the shoulders of the renegade and quickly had his arms secured.

"Now let the Iron Eyes find the key of the iron ropes on the White Hunter's wrists," said Red Dove calmly.

Iron Eyes soon drew the key of the steel hand-cuffs out of the saddle pocket of the renegade, and instantly released Wild Bill of his gag, irons and bonds.

"The Dead Shot is free now, and the Robin Red Breast is his prisoner," softly said the Red Dove, now lowering her weapon from the head of the renegade, who had become very pale at her words.

With an effort Wild Bill spoke, from the effects of the gag in his mouth, but swallowing a few cupfuls of water from the creek, he regained his voice and said:

"I thank the Red Dove from my heart; but as the Robin Red Breast trusted in the word of the Iron Eyes and came here, I cannot harm him, but would say let him go."

"He is the Dead Shot's bitter foe."

"True, and I am his, and will show him no mercy if we meet in fair combat; but now I cannot take his life."

"The Pistol Dead Shot has a good heart, and is a great chief," said the Red Dove, fully understanding Wild Bill's reasons for not taking advantage of his foe.

"Yes, Hikok, you are a square man, and I bury the hatchet between us for those words," said the renegade with real feeling and warmth.

Wild Bill smiled and replied:

"I leave the hatchet unburied, Calvin Clement, and may the best man win should we meet again."

"Now, for the safety of the brave Indian maiden, as your going alone upon the prairie would bring your pack of howling red wolves upon her, I will leave you tied here until she and her brother can make good their escape."

At these words Red Dove beckoned to Wild Bill to approach and said:

"Up the creek three miles is your horse, and the Iron Eyes has your arms in his blanket, and we can reach there, and that will give us a long start, and the Dog Sioux will not dare follow us far."

Wild Bill then returned to the renegade and said:

"Robin Red Breast, I'll tie you here, but if you are smart and have patience you can untie yourself, in half an hour, and then go after your red hounds and put them on our trail; but I warn you that if you ride far toward the settlement the rancheros will make this country to hot for you."

Wild Bill then set to work and skillfully bound the renegade, so that he would have hard work to undo the knots within less than an hour's time, and then mounting his horse he said:

"Calvin Clement, you know that I owe this maiden my life, for I know you would have killed me, and I warn you, that if harm befall her, I shall dog your trail like a bloodhound, and, by the worst torture I can invent for such a wretch to die, you shall end your days."

Without another word he rode away on the mustang he had ridden there, while upon either side was Iron Eyes and Red Dove, the brother's face bright with joy at her clever ruse to free the man she so madly loved.

CHAPTER XL.

UNREQUITED LOVE.

As the two Indians and Wild Bill rode away, the renegade was the picture of fury, for he felt how cleverly he had been mastered at his own game of treachery.

He had intended to deliberately shoot the Iron Eyes dead, as soon as he could get near him, and also the horse ridden by Red Dove, and this would give him the much coveted scalp of the young chief, place the maiden in his power, and leave his foe Wild Bill still at his mercy.

But Red Dove's daring had thwarted this treachery, and the renegade was left to nurse his own rage and untie his bonds.

At a swift gallop, and keeping well in the shelter of the willows, the three rode up the creek, and within half an hour's ride came to where Eucher was awaiting them, with the faithful Grip lying down near by.

The joy of Grip, at sight of his master was unbounded, and Eucher also recognized the one who had so long been his companion, and Wild Bill seemed deeply touched at again meeting his dumb pets.

But they did not tarry longer than for Wild Bill to mount Eucher, and transfer all the equipments not needed by the three to the back of the mustang, which the renegade had mounted his prisoner upon, little dreaming he would become that prisoner's property.

Riding out then from the willows it was some time before the Dog Soldier Sioux descried them upon the prairie.

But with seven miles' start they had little to fear from pursuit, and rode at a swift gallop toward the mountains.

Looking back they saw that the Dog Sioux band were greatly excited for awhile, and then, in a body, started for the buffalo ford on the creek.

They had gotten half-way there when the

fugitives saw a horseman dash out from the willows and ride toward the warriors.

It was the reueagle, and he was gesticulating wildly as he rode.

At last he reached the band, a halt was called, and then all came on in pursuit of the fugitives, who now had ample start to cause them no need to press their horses.

After reaching the ford, and discovering that his foes had disappeared in the foot-hills, Robin Red Breast realized the uselessness of the pursuit, and turned the band homeward, for he had no desire to bring the allied forces of settlers and Black Bear down upon him, which would drive him to the plains and mountains further north.

Seeing that the Robin had wisely given up the chase the fugitives drew their horses down to a walk, and headed for the village of the Black Bear half a hundred miles distant, where Wild Bill had consented to go at the urgent request of his red friends who had so nobly served him.

It was late in the night when they rode into the village; but the Black Bear was aroused, and gave to his former patient, and his guest a warm welcome among his people, and a tepee was placed at the services o' the visitor, where he was soon asleep, in the midst of a tribe that only a short while before had been his bitter enemies, and longed to take his scalp.

The following morning Wild Bill met the Sioux chiefs, and was an object of admiration to them, and the envy of every young warrior in the village, for all had heard of his desperate deeds, and that he bore a charmed life, while Black Bear had told his people that the great Waite Hunter fearlessly dwelt in a ranch haunted by shadows from the happy hunting-grounds, a circumstance that made them regard him with reverence and awe as one favored by the Great Spirit.

After a few days' stay in the village of Red Dove's people, and in which Grip also came in for the greatest admiration as well as master, for he would not notice an Indian canine in the tribe, Wild Bill bade all farewell and started homeward to his lonely and ghost-haunted ranch.

Red Dove and Iron Eyes accompanied him several miles upon his way, but at last the maiden came to a halt, and, with tears in her eyes, held forth her hand in farewell.

With real emotion Wild Bill grasped her hand and told her how much he thanked her, and that she would be his Indian sister, and Iron Eyes his red-skin brother, and for them to come to him when they needed his aid.

But not one word of love spoke he to the red-skin maiden, and with a heart full of bitterness she went back to her people, the truth forcing itself upon her at last that she was not beloved by the man for whom she would gladly give up her very life.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE VIGILANTE CAPTAIN URGES A CLAIM.

SEVERAL days after the capture of Wild Bill by Robin Red Breast, Hazel Hart was surprised by seeing a horseman ride up to the ranch, whom she recognized as none other than the man she had had most cause to fear.

"Say that I do not care to see Captain Don," she said to old Nance.

The message was duly conveyed by the negress to the Vigilante captain, who was attired in his very best, and looked the exceedingly handsome man he was.

"Please say to Miss Hart, Nance, that I desire to see her upon a most important matter, and beg that she grant me an interview," replied the captain.

The message was taken to the maiden, and, wondering, anxious and imbibed, she concluded to see her visitor.

Entering the pleasant parlor, Hazel bowed haughtily, and remained standing, while the Vigilante captain arose and greeted her with courtesy.

"Miss Hart, I am sorry to have urged to see you, after your message that you were not at home to me; but the truth is, I beg to convince you that I have been grievously wronged by you, and by many," he said, in his soft winning way.

"I have been so grievously wronged by you, Captain Don, that I wonder you dare show your face before me."

"It is to convince you, Hazel—"

"Miss Hart, if you please," she said haughtily.

"It was Hazel once."

"Then I believed you an honorable man, but now I know you to be stained with dishonor, ay, and upon you rests the blood of my father and brother."

"Hazel Hart, I swear to you that I am not guilty of the crimes of which I am accused," he said, with an earnest frankness that caused her to look him squarely in the face, and for the moment seemingly to believe him.

Observing the advantage gained, he continued in the same low, but earnest tone:

"Unhappy in my Eastern home, from circumstances which I care not to relate, I came here to the border, and, with what little means I possessed, settled myself as a ranchero.

"I met you and loved you, and I was received as an honored guest by your father and mother; but jealous rivals, on account of my name being similar to an old foe of your father's, caused me to be looked upon with suspicion and then with hatred.

"Then came into the neighborhood some outlaws, who, strangely resembling me, committed a number of crimes for which I was blamed.

"That man I have found was a cousin of mine, between whom and myself there is a remarkable likeness, and he hating me, has done this to ruin me.

"He it was whose branch of the family had the feud with your kindred, and he it was who killed your brother and your father, and who is now committing crimes of which I am accused.

"But I am able, thank God, to prove an alibi, and I come to you, begging of you, Hazel, that you condemn me not until you know all."

"You, sir, as captain of a band of Vigilantes, should assuredly bring this double of yourself to the rope's end," she said coldly.

"I am moving heaven and earth to do so, Hazel, and I only need your kind sympathy to aid me in my work."

"Bring your double to justice, and let me see him face to face with you, and then I will bumbly beg you to forgive my doubt of you, and my cruel words against you."

"But, Darke Darrell, if such be your name, until I meet that man and yourself face to face, you and I are strangers."

"Hazel, one word—" he pleaded.

"No, for you know the alternative; go!"

He bowed in his courtly way, turned, and left the room, and as he rode away, Hazel Hart gazed after him and muttered:

"Yes, I could have loved him once, or at least thought I did; but be he innocent of all wrong I could not now do so, as in my heart is the image of a man as far above him as an angel above a devil.

"But how is it, that strange man fascinates me?

"He does not love me, I almost know; his life is one of continual bloodshed, and the cross he has to bear seems to be to kill his fellow-beings.

"And yet I blame him not, for he is all gentleness and kindness, and a bitter fate only makes him what he is.

"Ah, me! how different it is with true love, for even if he were evil I believe I would love him."

In these words Hazel Hart but expressed the incongruities of a woman's heart; as the reader may have had an opportunity to discover.

CHAPTER XLII.

A GUEST AT HART RANCH.

When Wild Bill returned to his Haunted Ranch he discovered that no stranger had been there since his departure, to rob or disarrange, and the key was where Red Dove told him he would find it.

And yet there was evidence that his former ghostly visitor had been playing the same old pranks, as the skeleton form had been taken from the peg where he had hung it outside, and was once more snugly ensconced in his bed.

"This cot's too small, Dry Bones, for you and me, so git," he said in his habitually calm way, and once more the skeleton was returned to the peg on the outside of the cabin, while Grip, as if to urge upon the unsightly object the impropriety of going into his master's bed, sat on his haunches opposite to it and barked until Wild Bill bade him be still, adding:

"Your tail will drop to-night quick enough, Grip, when that chap's cousin comes prowling along in its midnight walk."

"Then you'll be as still as if the bark had all been drawn out of you with a corkscrew."

"Here, go and drive Euchre and Renegade to the valley," and by the latter he referred to the mustang he had ridden from the Dog Soldier Sioux camp when a prisoner.

Grip readily obeyed, and returned and kept an eye on the cliff as though expecting more trouble from that quarter.

"That's right, old dog, for we were caught napping before, and we must keep our eyes on the watch, or we'll dance a jig in mid-air yet with a lariat round our necks; but come, let us have supper now, and to-morrow we'll ride over to Poker City for a day or two, and see what the natives think of us."

The following morning Wild Bill, mounted on his favorite horse, and thoroughly armed, locked his cabin and started for the town of Poker City followed by the faithful bloodhound.

Branching off from his regular course he went by the Hart ranch, where Hazel gave him a warm welcome, congratulated him upon his perfect restoration to health, and heard from his lips the story of his late adventures and daring rescue by Red Dove and Iron Eyes.

Hazel patted her little foot impatiently at the mention of Red Dove's name, and in her heart she felt deep jealousy for the red-skin maiden; but yet she was unable to detect in Bill's words or manner any reason for believing that he loved the Indian girl.

The maiden then told Wild Bill of her visit from the Vigilante captain, and of his assertion that he was the victim of a conspiracy against him, and he answered:

"Well, Miss Hazel, he may be; but I'll find it out before I leave Poker City, where I am now going."

Hazel tried hard to persuade him not to go to Poker City, as she dreaded trouble there; but he was determined, and only consented to remain at the ranch to dinner, instead, as she had hoped, much longer.

The dinner was a masterpiece of culinary art, old aunt Nance having tired herself.

"Fer dat lub of a gemman what sabe Missy Hazel," as she put it.

And Wild Bill enjoyed the meal immensely and Grip came in for a generous share, for Uncle Peter eyed him closely and said to Aunt Nance:

"Ole gal, keep dat darn dog chawin' vittals, an' he won't hab time ter look at us."

"Gor a'mighty, hain't he a libin' tarrer ter sinner?"

"Yas, honey; he am, an' I am watchin' him too, an' tends ter keep him chawin'; but in case he sh'u'l git scrumpshious, does yer see dat tea-kettle, ole man?"

"I does."

"Waal, chile, it are full o' scaldin' water, an' I is keepin' it on ther hottest part o' ther fire, an' thet dog-goned dog'll git peeled from de nose to de tail eend ef he open a growl in dis kitchen, fer he do look as tho' ther debbil were in-side o' him."

"He do, ole woman; but keep him feedin' au' he won't growl."

Whether Grip, from having his master talk to him so much, had acquired a knowledge of the Anglo-Africano tongue, and understood what was said I am unable to state; but certain it is he suddenly, as Aunt Nance moved toward him with more food, shot out of the door like an arrow, a sudden movement on his part that caused Black Peter to utter a terrified oath, and the old negress to spring for her kettle of hot water, believing the time for peeling the dog with scalding water had arrived.

CHAPTER XLIII.

A SENSATION IN POKER CITY.

THE sun was just touching the horizon when Wild Bill rode into Poker City at an easy canter, with Grip at the heels of his horse, and presenting a rather formidable party.

Every person along the thoroughfares gazed upon the handsome man, for already was his face well known to many, and from lip to lip flew the rumor that Wild Bill the Pistol Dead Shot had come into town, and this circumstance gave the lie to many who had said, with all his pluck, he would not dare come to Poker City after having slain ten of the band of Vigilantes.

Going straight to the Ranchero's Exchange, he put up his horse in the stable and sauntered carelessly along to Sloan's grocery, Grip keeping close at his heels, and bestowing an ugly look upon any one he met.

Elijah Sloan greeted his customer most cordially, congratulating him upon his healthy appearance, and then, in a whisper, said:

"You played the devil with the gang that went to hang you; but be careful, for there are three of the thirteen now in town, and there sits one of them now."

"I have not heard him say a word against you, but t'other two I have, and you must watch 'em sharp."

The one he referred to as being present, who had been of the thirteen to attack the cabin, was Boss Bricktop, who was seated over in the loafers' corner of the store.

He had seen Wild Bill enter, but had made no remark, and now he saw his recent friend, but pretended foe, advancing toward him.

"You were one of the gang who attacked my ranch, I believe?" said Wild Bill, sternly.

"I were, pard, an' I are ashamed o' myself fer ther lickin' you gi'n us," frankly answered Bricktop, who had caught the quiet sign that he wished to speak to him as soon as he could.

"Then you have no quarrel with me, sir?" continued Bill.

"Nary, pard, fer I are as peaceable as a lamb."

"All right; pard Sloan, put us all up some drinks," and the store-keeper readily obeyed Wild Bill's request, and the crowd drank his health with a gusto.

Telling Sloan he would come in and make some purchases before he left town, Wild Bill started up the street toward an unfrequented part of the city, and, walking slowly, he was soon overtaken by Bricktop, who said:

"Pard, yer skeered me durn nigh ter death, for yer did look mad; but perhaps it are yer nat'r'l look."

"I wished to give you a sign to meet me, Boss, and knew not how else to do it."

"Now, what have you discovered?"

"There is sart'inely two of 'em, an' I've a friend who is goin' ter tell 'ne whar ter find ther double."

"Indeed! this is news; but when will you know?"

"To-morrow some time."

"Then, if I have left town, come to the ranch, and bring your friend if you wish."

"I'll do it."

"After I have solved this mystery, I will give you a position as head herder on my ranch, if you will take it."

"Will a baby suck candy, pard?"

"All right, the position is yours; now tell me who has the boss gambling saloon here."

"Paddy Wells' has ther Palis."

"Then I shall go there to night; but first I shall go to the Exchange for supper."

"Be on hand at both places if you can."

"I'll be thar; but look out fer Bouncer Brooks —"

"The landlord?"

"That's him; an' keep yer eye open fer ther two ther hel'ed make up ther thirteen."

"I'll be on my guard."

"An' so'll be I, fer they sha'n't go no backslidin' work on yer, pard."

Wild Bill laughed lightly, and the two parted.

Straight to the Ranchero's Exchange Bill went, and his entrance into the tavern caused a general hum of excitement, for it was now after dark, and the floating crowd had congregated there in anticipation of some disturbance, as all Poker City now knew the Pistol Dead Shot was in town, and were aware of the threats made against his life by many.

Unmindful of the sensation his entrance into the tavern created, Wild Bill walked straight to the counter, nodded to Bouncer Brooks who stood behind it, picked up a pen to register his name, leant over the book, and suddenly dropped to the floor, just as there came a pistol's ring behind him, and with a shriek of agony the giant landlord sunk behind his desk, a bullet in his heart.

"You got my medicine, Bouncer," said Wild Bill as he sprung to his feet, his right hand thrust forward, and in it a revolver.

With the movement came the report and down dropped a man in the crowd, the same who had fired the shot, meant for Wild Bill, and fatal to the landlord, whom Bill, under his brows, had seen make a motion to some one behind to either fire or hit him, and this had caused him to drop with the rapidity of lightning.

"Are he dead?" cried several voices.

"Why ask, didn't ther Pistol Dead Shot pull trigger?" came an answer.

"Yes, he are dead, an' he got it in his brain," said another.

"An' Bouncer got it in his heart when he were not specting it."

"Who are he?"

"Number 'leven o' ther thirteen."

"Waal, thar are number twelve, as has been givin' lip ter what he are goin' ter do when he see ther Dead Shot; better send him word Wild Bill are hear so as we kin bury 'em both in ther same coffin."

This remark caused a general laugh; but Wild Bill had heard all, though he had seemingly been intent upon registering his name, and that of Grip.

When he had finished, those who glanced over the register read:

"Wild Bill, Pistol Dead Shot,
"Grip, "The Haunted Ranch."

"Come, my man, as the lanlord is not here to attend to business, kindly show me my room," said Wild Bill calmly, addressing an employee of the tavern, who readily obeyed.

After making his toilet for supper, Wild Bill went to the bar, nodded pleasantly to the barkeeper, who had suddenly, by his act, stepped into the proprietorship of the Ranchero's Exchange, and turning to the crowd asked them to join him in a drink, an invitation that was promptly accepted, and then an adjournment was made to the supper-room, where Grip occupied his seat at the table with the dignity of a judge.

Suddenly Wild Bill detected a little by-play over in one corner of the room, for he saw a man enter hastily, seize a napkin, waiter and apron, and fastening the latter around him, start for the kitchen.

Watching the door for his reappearance, for Bill had recognized his man as number twelve of the band who had attacked him, he knew that the villain was playing a bold game to get behind his chair and shoot him, knowing that in his disguise as a servant no one would notice his movement.

But, while sipping his coffee, and with his eye noticing every form and face that passed in and out of the door leading from the dining-room to the kitchen, and through which his intended assassin had disappeared, he was suddenly startled by a fierce yelp, and savage spring from Grip, and the floor shook under the fall of two heavy bodies.

Every one was on his feet in an instant, and there upon the floor, lay the would-be assassin, his cocked pistol just fallen from his limp hand, and his throat crushed in the jaws of the savage hound, whose quick eyes had caught sight of the man as he came behind his master, and saw in his hand the deadly weapon that was being thrust against his head, and which his instinct told him was meant to harm.

"Let go, Grip, for you have done your work, good dog."

"Here, waiter, give me another cup of coffee, for mine was upset in that little trouble just now; and fetch another steak for my dog," was Bill's cool order as he resumed his seat at the table, and motioned to Grip to do likewise, while their example was generally followed, few showing commiseration for the assassin, whose neck the iron paws of the bloodhound had broken.

CHAPTER XLIV.

A GAME OF CARDS.

AFTER leaving the supper-room, and more than ever an object of interest to Poker citizens, Wild Bill lighted a cigar and sauntered in the direction of Paddy Wells's "Palis o' Fine Arts," as the sign over the door read.

He seated himself at a table in a corner, so that no one could "get the drop on him," without his seeing them first, and quickly looked around over the gathering crowd.

Presently the Vigilante captain entered, was greeted with a score of welcomes, and spying Wild Bill crossed over to where he sat.

"Good-evening, sir, I am glad to meet you again, and regret that some of my men should have visited you at your ranch," he said pleasantly.

"I was surprised at not seeing you there," said Bill.

"No, I did not uphold the act, and am glad I was not mixed up in it."

"Yes, I guess it's a subject of congratulation on your part; but would you like to join me in a little game?"

"Yes, if it will entertain you."

"It would indeed," said Bill earnestly.

"If you are as good a hand at cards as you are with a pistol, I'll stand no show," said the Vigilante with a smile.

"All men who have nerve have a show in any game, whether it be for life or gold," was Wild Bill's significant reply.

All in the room had now centered their interest upon the two splendid-looking men who sat at the table together, for they felt that there was mischief lurking beneath the smile of the Vigilante captain, and they had discovered enough about Wild Bill to know that Dagger Don, quick on the draw, good shot, and man of nerve that he was, might find in the stranger more than a match.

"What will your stake be?" smiling'y asked the Vigilante.

"Suit yourself."

"One hundred?"

"Yes."

The two staked their money and the game was begun.

Wild Bill played quickly, yet cautiously, and he won the first game.

Then Dagger Don won three games in succession, and betting largely on the fourth Wild Bill won.

The Vigilante captain was fretted at this loss, and showed it; but whether losing or winning, his adversary was perfectly cool.

Again they played, and Wild Bill won, and thus it went on until the Vigilante had lost largely, and said, in angry tones:

"I think it's now about time to put a check on you, for first you stole horses, then killed citizens in our town, and now cheat at cards!" and from his first word the Vigilante had a pistol leveled in the face of Wild Bill.

But not the quiver of a muscle showed that Wild Bill either heard the insulting words or saw the revolver, and a deathlike silence hung upon the crowd.

"Down, Grip!"

The look and words caused the Vigilante captain to quickly turn his head, expecting that the ferocious dog was about to spring upon him, for he had heard of the affair at the supper table.

But Grip lay behind his master's chair, sleeping the sleep of the weary; and the words of Wild Bill had so well served their purpose that when Dagger Don again glanced at his foe he saw a pistol held in his face, while suddenly an iron hand seemed to clutch his own weapon.

"Dagger Don, or Devil Don, as you like best, you played this game with me to get me into your power, and you insulted me by false accusations, as you know; but I'll not kill you now, but one week from this I'll meet you in this town, between sunrise and sunset, and I warn you to be ready, for I mean business to the hilt."

"I'll meet you, if you are not afraid to come," sneered the Vigilante captain.

"I'll be here without fail. Good-night, gentlemen," and Wild Bill quietly arose and left the gambling saloon, the eyes of all following until the door shut him out of view.

It was still early, and as Sloan's store was not yet closed, he went there, made his necessary purchases, and going to the stable after his horse, rode out of town on his way homeward, his stern face showing no sign of the emotion he felt at the scenes through which he had just passed, for with all his lion nature and desperate courage when aroused, Wild Bill's heart was in the right place.

CHAPTER XLV.

TRAILING A GHOST.

THE sun was above the horizon when Wild Bill rode up to his cabin door and dismounted.

Entering, he saw the same skeleton form in his cot as on the occasion of his other departures from the cabin.

"Well, for a fellow that has slept in a grave, you do love your comfort, I must say," he muttered, as he once more returned the skeleton to his roost outside.

"How the devil that old rattler gets into my cabin I don't know."

"There is no other key like this, for I asked Sloan, and the windows are all as I left them, and there are no crevices in the walls."

"Perhaps he came down the chimney!"

"No, for he could not get in at the top."

"Grip, I've got a notion to go off again and leave you in the cabin to tackle the ghosts."

"No, your tail drops at the suggestion, although you could chew a full-sized man up without trouble."

"Well, I'll go ghost-hunting myself to-morrow night, if that grave tramp shows itself to-night, for it is time I solved this mystery."

And that night, as before, the ghostly form did appear, and gliding toward the cañon was lost to view.

Wild Bill calmly watched it disappear and returning to his cot sunk to sleep once more.

The next night, an hour before midnight, the regular appearing hour of the ghostly visitor, he bade Grip lay down in the cabin and wait his return.

Then, leaving the door open, as was his custom, he glided softly in the direction of the cañon.

"Concealing himself behind the stockade barrier, he waited for the coming of the strange form he had so often seen.

Midnight at last came, as he discovered by feeling the hands of his watch, and then he saw the form approaching in the darkness.

It came from the direction of the graves in the thicket, where had also been buried by Black Bear, the bodies of the dead Vigilantes, and gliding by the cabin, came directly toward the cañon.

As it drew near Wild Bill saw that the same weird, greenish light shone on it, and he nerved himself for the coming struggle, as though he were going to face half a score of foes.

Nearer and nearer it came, until the mouth of the cañon was reached.

Here it came to a halt, turned and seemed to be looking back toward the cabin, and once more came slowly on.

Turning aside, before reaching the stockade, it went close to the right wall of the cañon, where the cliff rose over a hundred feet sheer above, and here it again stopped.

Watching intently, Wild Bill saw its arms move, then it seemed rising from the ground bodily, and, with a mighty spring he leaped the barrier and seized the ghostly form in his powerful arms.

A wild cry broke from its lips, and an answering bark came from Grip in the cabin, while Wild Bill said quickly:

"By Heaven! but you are solid for a ghost, and your lungs haven't been hurt by your midnight prowling."

"Release me!"

The voice was hoarse with fright and passion combined.

"Nary release, my ghostly friend, for I'm out ghost hunting to-night, and twon't do to go home without any game, as Grip would never forgive me."

"I say release me," came again in hoarse tones.

"Not I, for I've got to see just what you are made of."

"Come, if you cry out, I'll send my knife-blade reaching for your heart," and Wild Bill tried to urge his strange captive on.

But it would not move, and raising the white-robed form in his strong arms, he carried it straight to his cabin.

At the sight of the ghostly-looking lead his master carried, Grip seemed uneasy; but a light was at once struck, the door closed, and Wild Bill turned for a fair look at his capture.

"Well, you are a healthy looking ghost, that's a fact," he said.

But there came no answer from the white-robed form, that stood like a statue before the visitor.

"Yes, here is your shroud, and this tin cup turned bottom side up, with a green glass on it, and a candle in it, and fastened on your head made that greenish light.

"Then you are rubbed all over with that cursed herb the Injuns use to keep dogs off, and that's what made Grip skip for his hole when he smelt it."

"Well, you weigh just about one hundred and seventy pounds of cussedness, and if you don't wag that tongue of yours and give me full particulars regarding you, I'll put you where all good ghosts go."

As Wild Bill addressed the ghostly capture he had made, he had deliberately stripped from it the white robe and spectral equipment, and a tall, well-knit man was revealed, clad in the rough costume of a miner.

In his belt was a knife, his only weapon, he seeming to rely upon his ghostly attire to keep any one at a distance.

His face was dark, evil-looking, bearded,

and as pallid as a corpse, while he trembled violently, not having recovered from the shock of Wild Bill's unexpected spring upon his ghostship.

"Now who are you?" asked Wild Bill.

"There is no need of telling you, for you do not know me," was the surly answer.

"I will know you though, and if you don't answer me I'll kill you, and turn you over to Grip to pick, and he'll have your bones so clean by morning I can hang you upon the other peg outside, as a mate to my bony friend now there."

"Now talk!"

"What do you want to know?"

"Whose ghost are you?"

"I was masquerading for a purpose."

"I'd like to know it."

"I'll give you a handsome sum in gold if you'll let me go," pleaded the prisoner.

"And I'll give you just eight inches of steel between your ribs if you don't talk."

The man saw that his captor was not to be trifled with, so he said:

"What shall I say?"

"Who are you?"

"My name is Burke Branscombe."

"Ah, indeed; you have told the truth, and you are just the man I want."

The prisoner looked surprised, and asked:

"What do you want with me?"

"To hang you, if you don't tell all you know."

"What terms will I get?"

"Death if you don't."

"If I do?"

"I'll let you go free when I've done with you."

"I'll do it."

"You show wisdom; now I'm a boss listener so sail in."

"There is a mine in this mountain."

"So I have thought; how many are working it?"

"Four of us."

"Ahl for how long?"

"Three years the others have been here, but I came six months ago."

"Yes, after a little killing scrape you got into in Kansas City; but how did you manage to find this place?"

"I had a pard here, and he wrote me how to find him."

"And I suppose you have piled up plenty of dust out of the mine?"

"Yes, we have a snug little sum; but we are about down to bed-rock, and it don't pan out much now."

"Who discovered this mine?"

"The first owner of this ranch."

"Ah, yes, and he lost his life suddenly!"

"Yes."

"Who killed him?"

"His chief cowboy."

"And who aided him?"

"Two other cowboys he let into the secret."

"And you have just killed everybody that has come here to live since?"

"Excepting you."

"That's so; and have given out the idea that the place was haunted?"

"Yes."

"And kept all people away?"

"Excepting you."

"That's so; but I am a pard of all ghosts; I have to make so many you know."

"Now, tell me who put that notice on my door to quit?"

"We did."

"And who put that skeleton in my cot?"

"I did."

"How did you get into my cabin?"

"There is a secret door in the chimney."

"I'd like to see it."

The prisoner arose and showed that the stucco work of the chimney on one side, was ingeniously arranged on a board with binges, which swung open, disclosing a space large enough to admit a man.

"You are artists, pard," said Bill in his sinister way.

"It was made by the first owner of the cabin, as a means of getting in, by lowering himself from the cliff with a lariat, and the herder knowing about it, we used it to frighten you," explained the miner.

"Now it's funny, but I didn't frighten worth a cent; but tell me, have you four men, just to get the gold in this secret mine, killed all who came here, and played ghost to scare others off?"

"The others have."

"Ah, yes; they did the killing and you played the ghost."

"Now, were you not afraid of being shot?"

"People don't shoot at ghosts, and besides I had to take the chances."

"You took mighty big chances with me, for if I hadn't thought you were a female ghost, I'd have sent a bullet into you the first night I saw you."

"Now, pard, I wish you to guide me to your mine."

"You said I might go free, and if I guided you there, they'd kill me."

"I guess not, so come."

The man dared not disobey, and taking up the ghostly robes Wild Bill went with him out of the cabin, calling to Grip to follow, which he did at a distance, not liking the herb with which the white shroud was saturated.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE SECRET MINE.

WILD BILL, walking close to the side of his prisoner, followed him through the pine thicket, where were the graves of the miners' victims, listening to his story how he had always ascended to the cliff by a lariat, he had just lowered, after passing the cabin in his ghostly walk.

Passing through the thicket the prisoner stopped at a tall pine tree, which he said must be climbed, and Wild Bill followed him up the trunk, to where a stout limb branched off over a spur of rock, and Grip was left behind.

Along this they went, and a walk of a hundred yards brought them to a cave in an overhanging rock.

"This is the mine, and they are in there working, for we work at night and sleep by day," whispered the prisoner.

"All right; wait for me here; but if you attempt to escape I'll put my bloodhound on your trail, and—"

"I'll wait," quickly said the man.

"See that you do!" and throwing the ghostly raiment over his head and form, Wild Bill stepped into the cave, and guided by the sound of blows in the rock, and feeling his way, he soon came in sight of a light.

There were three men at work, digging into a meager vein of gold, and several lanterns lighted them in their work.

Near him was piled up considerable quantities of the precious metal, which the men had gotten out of the rock with great difficulty, and on one side of him were the bear-skin beds of the miners, with a few cooking utensils, and a box of provisions.

"Pards, strike work, for I want you."

At the stern, deep voice the three miners turned quickly, and their picks fell from their hands at sight of a white-robed figure before them, and a pair of revolvers covering them.

"Who in natur' are you?" cried one.

"Life's too short to answer questions, pard, so come here one by one, and let me fix you so that I'll be sure of you."

"Boys, he are one, an' we are three—Come!" and the man sprung forward, to fall dead across a pile of gold ore.

Terrified at the fate of their comrade, and with the death-shot echoing through the cavern the other two cried for mercy, and one at a time were quickly bound.

"Now I'll take you to my home and entertain you; come."

Silently they followed him out of the cavern, and seeing their traitor companion without, they cursed him bitterly for his treachery.

But Wild Bill commanded silence, and lowering them from the cliff, called to Grip, who was patiently waiting at the tree, to watch them, and then followed the unbound miner down to the plateau.

Arriving at the cabin the three were secured, and telling the bloodhound to keep his eye on them, Wild Bill threw himself upon his cot, and went to sleep as calmly as though no care was upon him.

With the break of dawn he awoke, and found his prisoners all safe, and Grip keeping guard and wide awake.

"Pards, we'll have some breakfast, and then we'll go to Poker City, and I'll turn you over to the citizens for trial, while you, my friend, had better light out if you wish to save your neck."

The one he had addressed, and who was the ghost impersonator, was only too anxious to get away, and taking his comrades' weapons, and some food Bill gave him, left the cabin in hot haste.

"It'll not be long before he's mounted on somebody's horse, and he'll get along in the world, pards, so don't you worry about him."

"Any fellow who can play ghost as he did will make a living; now we'll have some breakfast."

But neither of the prisoners had any appetite, and the meal was soon over, and Wild Bill was about to leave Grip as custodian of his captives when he discovered Boss Bricktop coming toward the cabin, and behind him another horseman.

"Pard, heur we is fer a fact, an' I has got all partic'lers," said Bricktop, and as the two dismounted he continued:

"This are my pard, Hank Hutchins, an' he are squar', an' he'll tell us a few words o' wisdom."

Wild Bill greeted the new-comer, and then told of his capture of the miners, after which he sat down to hear what Bricktop's friend had to tell.

CHAPTER XLVII.

BETRAYED.

HANK HUTCHINS, the pard of Bricktop, was a small, slenderly-formed person with a boyish face, red hair, cut short, and a mustache as fiery in hue as his hair.

He was dressed in real border style, excepting that he wore a corduroy sack coat, and his hat had an enormous brim.

He was armed with a revolver and knife, and spoke in a low tone and in a voice that was slightly effeminate.

"Well, pard, Bricktop says you know something of Dagger Don and his Double?" said Wild Bill, inquiringly.

"I do," was the quiet response.

"Who is this Dagger Don?"

"His real name is Darke Darrell, and he is a Kentuckian; but he was forced to leave home some years ago on account of killing and robbing a friend who had with him a large sum of money."

"He began well."

"He has ended worse, for though a ranchero, having purchased his stock with the money he got by his murder and robbery, and the Vigilante captain, he is the secret leader of a band of outlaws."

"Ah! his record is improving; now, how is it he manages to be in two places at the same time?"

"He does not; there are two bands he controls; one is the Vigilantes, some of whom are in his secret, and serve a double purpose, and the other is his outlaws."

"Among these latter is a man strangely like Darke Darrell, and a little disguising and similar dressing makes him more so, for few could tell them apart."

"This man is his lieutenant, and he it is that puzzles the settlers, as to the deeds of the Vigilante captain, for he is his perfect slave."

"And where is this lieutenant?"

"He has a camp in the mountains fifteen miles from here."

"You know it?"

"I do."

"May I ask how you found it?"

"I was a member of the band."

"Indeed! you don't look like a villain; but looks are deceiving," said Wild Bill.

"In my case particularly so, for I am a woman."

For an instant Wild Bill lost his composure and started, while he asked, amazedly:

"A woman?"

"Yes; Darke Darrell is my husband, and the man he killed was my brother."

"His crimes made me revengeful and I have dogged his steps, and tracking him became a member of his band, at first taking his shadow for him."

"How to punish him, and his band together, I knew not until I had a talk with Bricktop, and he brought me to you."

"And what punishment do you wish meted out to Darrell?" asked Bill.

"At first I intended to kill him myself; but now I will not stain my soul with his life; but he is too base to live, for he sought to make Hazel Hart his wife; but she refused him, and learning that an Indian girl, whose mother was a white woman, had inherited a fortune from her grandfather, a Canadian trader, he was anxious to marry her and thus gain possession of her fortune."

"To do this he leagued himself with a wretch, a renegade chief of the Dog Soldier Sioux, who was to place the girl in his power

in return for Hazel Hart, against whom he wished to reap revenge.

"But lately learning that Miss Hart, through an aunt's death, is left a large fortune, having seen the letters in reference to her inheritance through robbing the mail, he has now gone back to her, and is trying to prove that he is impersonated by some villain who did her cruel wrong by killing her father and brother, when he was guilty of all, for where his shadow acted, it was but through his orders."

"Now you know who and what Dagger Don and his Double is," and as the woman spoke she removed her wig and mustache, and a beautiful, but sad face was revealed to the astonished gaze of Wild Bill.

After some further conversation upon the subject, Wild Bill learned that Dagger Don, his Double and Robin Red Breast, were to meet in the mountains at the outlaw retreat in two days, and at once he decided to capture them.

Dispatching Bricktop on a fresh horse to the village of Black Bear, he gave him a note to Red Dove, who he knew could both read and write, and the result of this was that the Indian girl, her brother Iron Eyes, and fifty Sioux warriors accompanied Boss back to the cabin the following day.

In a few words he told Red Dove of her grand fortune, and she was given the letters which the outlaws had taken from the men who had been sent to seek her, and whom they had killed, and which the deserted wife of Darke Darrell had saved for her, as also had she those sent by mail to Hazel Hart.

Under guidance Wild Bill and his party, carrying the two miners with them, sought the outlaw retreat, and Iron Eyes, who had gone on a scout, having reported that both Red Breast and Dagger Don, accompanied by a few white horsemen and warriors, had passed on into the mountains, they moved cautiously to the attack, and suddenly dashed upon the surprised and thunderstruck outlaws.

At the head of all went Wild Bill, with Grip plunging along by his side, and straight for Robin Red Breast he rode, and recognizing him the renegade's revolver flashed with that of his foe.

But his bullet found a target in poor Grip's brain, who sunk without a groan, while Wild Bill's aim, ever true, pierced the heart of the cruel renegade.

As if conscious that his work was well done, without looking to see, Wild Bill wheeled and rode down upon Darke Darrell, crying out as he did so:

"This is not Poker City, Dagger Don, but we are well met."

The Vigilante captain was defending himself against two Indians, but turned at the words of Wild Bill to find a revolver at his head, and hear the demand:

"There's no steel covering over your head, Darke Darrell, so surrender."

"I can do nothing else," was the sullen reply.

"That's wise of you, for I would hate to cheat the hangman out of a job," and in an instant almost the outlaw leader was securely bound, while, coming up and gazing into his face, his deserted wife said, with triumph in her tones:

"Darke Darrell, whatever death you die, remember you owe it to me."

"Constance!" he gasped, gazing in horror upon the face, now no longer disguised.

"Yes, I am Constance, your wife, soon to be your widow."

"We shall meet no more on earth. Farewell."

She mounted her horse and rode slowly away, and leaving a detail of Indians to bury the dead, among whom was Don Darrell's Double, Wild Bill set off with his prisoners for Poker City.

CONCLUSION.

WHEN Wild Bill arrived in Poker City with his prisoners, he had no difficulty in getting them taken off his hands by the enraged citizens, and "Judge Lynch" quickly sat in trial upon them.

The miners were first tried for the murder of the owner of the ranch that had been said to be haunted, and their sentence followed quickly, and execution immediately after.

Then Dagger Don was tried for his crimes, and though he tried to prove his innocence, the proofs against him were damning, and he was strung up to a tree to suffer the penalty of his

misdeeds, and to the last was reckless and vindictive, cursing Wild Bill with his last breath. His followers quickly followed after at the end of a rope, and when the executions were over Poker City looked so serene, having been cleaned of so many of its evil citizens, that Boss Bricktop remarked:

"They'll be buildin' a gospil mill here afore long, an' be birin' a Bible sharp ter grind it."

After the executions were over, Wild Bill placed Red Dove under the charge of a young man, a late comer to Poker City, and whom he had before met, and he carried her to St. Louis, where she saw the executors of her grandfather's estate and came in possession of her property which she at once gave in the hands of her protector, to take care of it, and convinced that the one she loved did not love her, she let her hand go with her fortune.

But in the city she became unhappy, and leaving her husband and her fortune she returned to her own people among whom she now lives, and is an acknowledged queen.

Back to his ranch, no longer haunted, went Wild Bill, with Bricktop for his companion, and gathering together the gold in the secret mine, which did not pan out as well as was at first believed it would, the noble-hearted ranchero sent it to the heirs of the former owner, whom he knew to be in destitute circumstances.

And Hazel Hart?

She, in company with Constance Darrell, the deserted wife, sought the home of her aunt in the East, and readily came in possession of her inheritance; but her heart was in the far West, and parting from Mrs. Darrell, who went to dwell with her friends, after a year's absence she returned to her frontier home.

But disappointment greeted her, for Wild Bill had sold out his interest in his ranch to Bricktop, who was rapidly developing into a ranchero of standing in the settlement, and had gone to a town in Kansas of which he had been unanimously elected marshal.

Convinced now that he did not love her, Hazel some months after married a young captain at the fort, and though she never met him again, years after when she had children growing up around her and heard of Wild Bill's tragic death, she shed bitter, scalding tears, for the man in whose lonely mountain grave was buried her first and only love.*

* Upon the marble slab erected by Charlie Utter, "Colorado Charlie," is engraved the following inscription:

"WILD BILL (J. B. Hickok),

Killed by the Assassin, Jack McCall, in Deadwood, August 2d, 1876. Pard, we will meet again in the Happy Hunting Grounds, to part no more. Good-by. "COLORADO CHARLIE."

THE END.



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